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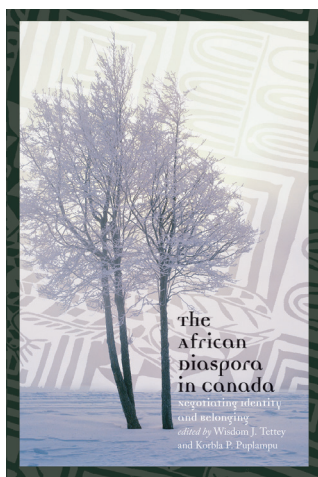
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THE AFRICAN DIASPORA IN CANADA: NEGOTIATING IDENTITY & BELONGING

Edited by Wisdom J. Tetley & Korbla P. Pupilampu

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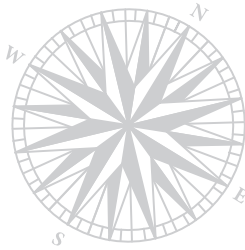
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SECTION II



Location, the Politics of Knowledge Construction, & the Canadian Educational System



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AFRICA(NS) IN THE CANADIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM: An Analysis of Positionality & Knowledge Construction

Henry M. Codjoe

INTRODUCTION

WHEN IT COMES TO THE EDUCATION of Africans in the diaspora, multicultural societies like Canada have made very little effort to systematically interrogate issues and questions about the nature of knowledge, positionality, and knowledge construction. Nowhere is this more central than in the schooling experiences of African-Canadian students. In fact, as Dei and James have observed, “many African-Canadian youths are experiencing alienation from the dominant school system” and, as a consequence, “have to deal with unfortunate attacks by some educational professionals on African cultures, histories, and identities” (Dei and James 1998, 103). An unmistakable manifestation of this modus operandum is the role of curricula in reproducing a structure of domination embedded in Canada’s social relations, institutions, and practices. For example, concerning education, it is noted that

Education in Canada is based on and fundamentally reflects the culture, values, and

experiences of a White, middle-class, largely urban population of northern European origins. The society most curricula present to students – indeed, the society personified by most teachers – is one with which non-Whites from poorer, non-urban, or immigrant backgrounds seldom can identify. Compared to their classmates, therefore, visible minority students find little in education that speaks directly to them. There is little that reflects the cultures or heroes of their heritage, that evokes their interest, or strengthens their self-image. Their respect for education dries up; they drop out. (cited in Kilgour 1994)

This lends credence to the notion that “curriculum and teaching are political matters” (Apple and Beyer 1998, 13b) and that “we need see it as being integrally connected to the cultural, political, and economic institutions of the larger society, institutions that may be strikingly unequal by race, gender, and class” (Apple and Beyer 1998, 4b). Canadian schools naturally are but a part of the larger societal dynamic, and their functions perpetuate these structural and cultural inequalities; in this context, the content and structure of schooling are not neutral, but actively reproduce this societal inequality through the knowledge and cultural forms which have been designated as *high status* and through ways by which groups are sorted and treated differentially (Apple 1990; Cheng et al. 1979; Ghosh 1995; Morrow and Torres 1995; Ogbu 1991). From this perspective, there is considerable importance to schooling and the curriculum as a major vehicle for hegemony by the dominant class in society (Aronowitz and Giroux 1985). In other words, “how a society selects, classifies, distributes, transmits, and evaluates the educational knowledge it considers to be public, reflects both the distribution of power and the principles of social control” (quoted in Bullivant 1983, 22).

There is no doubt that this distribution of power in Canada is skewed “towards a White, majority population [that] operates at many levels within the educational hierarchy, from teaching to research about teaching and schooling. Critical pedagogical discourse derives, in part, from an academic tradition created and shaped by Western European and Anglo-[Canadian] thinkers.” For instance, “the language in which we discuss our issues is a language permeated with ideas, beliefs, values, and positionings that have been formulated by the dominant majority. Terms such as *multiculturalism*, *diversity*, *ethnicity*, *race*, and more, have been defined and discussed by White, upper-middle-class, male academicians and politicians. Women and minorities who engage in this discourse must do so using a language formed by those who, historically and currently, occupy power positions in our society” (Estrada and McLaren 1993, 28). Minnich puts it this way:

There is a *root problem* underlying the dominant meaning system that informs our curricula. It is visible in the false universalization that has taken

a very few privileged men from a particular tradition to be the inclusive term, the norm, and the ideal for all. The faultiness, or partiality, of that universalization has been hidden from us, in part, because we too often tend to express ourselves in singular terms (especially *man* and *mankind*, but also, for example, the *citizen*, the *philosopher*, the *poet*, the *student*). Singular universals, even adequate ones, make thinking of plurality, let alone diversity, very difficult. (1990, 2–3; emphasis in the original)

This embodies what has been called the *selective tradition*: “Someone’s selection, someone’s vision of legitimate knowledge and culture, one that in the process of enfranchising one group’s cultural capital disenfranchises another’s” (Apple 1992, 5). The point here is that, all too often, *legitimate* knowledge does not include the historical experiences and cultural expressions of labour, people of colour, and others who have been less powerful (Roman and Christian-Smith with Ellsworth 1988). The absence of Black knowledge in many Canadian school curricula is not a simple oversight. Its absence represents an academic instance of racism, or what has been described as “willful ignorance and aggression towards Blacks” (Pinar 1993, 62). Indeed, Apple (1990) has argued that the selection and organization of knowledge for schools is an ideological process, one that serves the interests of particular classes and social groups, dynamic in nature and associated with continuities and contradictions. This important point is also echoed by Ghosh when she writes that

[c]ontemporary theories have uncovered the relationship between knowledge and power. They point to the highly political and subjective nature of knowledge because it serves the interests of the group in power and represents a world-view which is predominantly Eurocentric, Judeo-Christian, middle-class, White, and male-oriented. Knowledge is now seen increasingly as being historically located and socially constructed. The recognition that school knowledge is far from neutral provides a significant explanation as to how it serves students of different groups unequally. If knowledge is politically based, historically embedded, and socially constructed, and therefore, subjective, then questions arise as to what constitutes acceptable *knowledge*. (1995, 234)

For African-Canadian students, then, the structural and ideological reference points here are that “being educated in the Western canon not only perpetuates social exclusion but continues the fiction that Blacks have been marginal to the history and growth of [Canada]” (Sardar and Davies 2002, 141). The implication is obviously racist, and despite persistent denial by Canadians, race continues to be a problem in the nation (Mensah 2002; Barrett 1987; Cannon 1995; Campbell 1989; Lewis 1992; McKague 1991). In fact, the concept of race in Canada persists, and its permanent feature is shown by “the presence of a system

of racial meanings and stereotypes, of racial ideology” (Omi and Winant, in Rothenberg 2001, 15). This form of modern racism, as Flecha calls it, “occurs when the rules of the dominant culture are imposed on diverse peoples in the name of integration ... and presumes that different races have unequal levels of intellectual, cultural, economic, and political progress, rather than simply different ones” (Flecha 1999, 154). Within current educational practices in Canada, the image of the African student is thus viewed in this context, and it is “manifested in discriminatory treatment by teachers, counsellors, and administrators, and in curriculum and school practices that excluded Black students” (James and Brathwaite 1996, 18–19; Head 1975; D’Oyley and Silverman 1976).

In this chapter, I shall attempt to show “the role school curricula played in the creation and recreation of the ideological hegemony of the dominant classes” in the name of “legitimate knowledge, and how it is used to denigrate and *stigmatize* African peoples” (Apple 1995, 17; see also Rosenblum and Travis 2000, 26). In fact, I argue that the Canadian curriculum does not merely teach Western ideas and culture, it teaches the *superiority* of Western ideas and culture; it equates Western ways and thought with *Civilization* itself (Levine 1996, 20). This would explain why William Thorsell, the editor of the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, writing about why the “United States is clearly fragmented,” will opine that “Blacks and Hispanics constitute significant, visible, urbanized minorities that are largely unreconciled to the U.S. mainstream. They do not easily share some of its most treasured values, or virtues (such as, perhaps, love of education)” (1996, D6). It would also explain why the theoretical knowledge about the education of African-Canadian children advanced by such Black theorists as Carl James (1990), Enid Lee (1992), and Patrick Solomon (1992), to name a few, are rarely read or cited by Euro/Anglo-Canadian scholars in critical ways that challenge the status quo. In fact, there is minimal educational literature about Black students in Canada (Henry 1993). Pertinent to this discussion, then, is the failure of Canadian schools to effectively address the cultural, social, psychological, and educational needs of African students (Brathwaite and James 1996). Takaki puts it better when he observes, “What happens when someone with the authority of a teacher describes our society, and you are not in it? Such an experience can be disorienting – a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing” (Takaki 1993, 16). Indeed, growing numbers of minority students are being socialized in an institutional context which does not reflect their experiences, values, and beliefs. As Banks has argued, “the assumption that all children can learn equally well from teaching materials that only reflect the cultural experiences of the majority group is questionable and possibly detrimental to those minority group children who have strong ethnic identities and attachment” (Banks 1981, 64). This begs the following questions:

Rather than asking how we could get a student to acquire more curricular knowledge, I asked a more political set of questions. “Why and how are particular aspects of a collective culture represented in schools as objective, factual knowledge? How, concretely, may official knowledge represent the ideological configurations of the dominant interests in a society? How do schools legitimate these limited and partial standards of knowing as unquestioned truths?” (Apple 1995, 17)

The foregoing analyses lead us to the following additional, neglected questions: What should count as knowledge? Who shall control the selection and distribution of knowledge? Through what institutions? What knowledge is of most worth? Whose knowledge is it? How has certain knowledge come to be more appropriate for school curriculum content than other knowledge? By what mechanisms have certain realms of knowledge been given higher status than others? Whose class and social interests have been served by the form and content of schools? Why are the views and concerns of African people so often ignored in the school curriculum? (Beyer and Apple 1998a; Apple 1978; Noffke 1998; Minnich 1990; Sarup 1991)

In what follows, I briefly review the concepts and theories of knowledge, knowledge construction, and positionality. For the purposes of this chapter, I pay particular attention to the so-called *Western Canon* and how it has (mis)informed the debate on multiculturalism and the professed *culture wars* or *canon debate* in North America. And in a section I call “Knowledge Construction and the African World Experience,” I show how the historical reconstruction about race has been used in Western thought and ideas to advance an *essentialist* view that African peoples’ “unchangeable physical characteristics [are] linked in a direct, causal way to psychological or intellectual characteristics, and that on this basis distinguishes between superior and inferior racial groups” (Feagin and Feagin, in Codjoe 2001a, 281). Finally, I concretize these theoretical perspectives with research I carried out with African-Canadian students in Alberta (Codjoe 1997, 1998, 1999, 2001a and b), as well as other research findings on the schooling experiences of Black students in Canada (e.g., Dei 1996; Hoo Kong 1996; Solomon 1992; Brathwaite and James 1996; Spencer 1995). My empirical research is an effort to highlight certain aspects of the African-Canadian educational experience not commonly known to the general public. It seeks to speak “about the silences that often are registered but not so often highlighted and analyzed” (Sultana 1995, 113). With this in mind, my study focused on the successful secondary school experiences of African-Canadian students in Alberta. The primary purpose was to examine the experiences and narratives of these students in order to learn about and document some of the significant factors that influence and contribute to their educational achievement, with a particular focus on the biases in school curriculum and textbooks.

Study Methodology -

The sample for the study was drawn from a population of Black students in the metropolitan area of greater Edmonton. It was not a random sample, but rather, I sought – with the help of Black youth and community and student groups – Black students for this purpose. I did this because, unlike cities like Toronto, Halifax, or perhaps Montreal, there is no concentration of Black students in specific areas of Edmonton. I chose the students from an extensive list of individuals supplied to me by a Black community group. There were thirty students on the list, and more responded later to requests to take part in the project. Since I couldn't involve all thirty and more students, my first task was to select the required number of students needed. After some discussions with a number of the students and advice from my dissertation supervisor, I selected twelve students from the pool. The major reason or rationale for choosing these students is that they showed more awareness of the issues concerning Black education and could articulate more clearly their feelings, experiences, and thoughts as compared to the other students. Although I chose participants mainly on the basis of race, academic success, and urban experience (Edmonton), there were other important criteria. Chief among them were (1) successful graduation from an Alberta high school and entry into one of Alberta's colleges or universities; (2) gender; (3) place of birth or country of origin; (4) student availability and willingness to participate in the study; and (5) conversance with Black educational and other social issues. My primary aim here was to ensure a wide range of the Black student experience in Edmonton, as well as to keep the study size manageable in order to facilitate in-depth inquiry.

The sample included young men and women who had a variety of experiences in schools in Canada and, in some cases, in other countries as well. About half graduated from high school in the last two years of my study, the other half graduating in the last three or more years. Thus, at the time I interviewed these students, they were between twenty-two and twenty-six years of age and represented a number of linguistic and social class groups, as well as both sexes. In fact, there are an equal number of men and women. They are also first, second, or third generation Canadians coming from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. Some of the students were from single-parent families, although the majority were from two-parent families. I can thus argue that my sample represents important dimensions of the diversity within the African-Canadian community.

The one common characteristic of my student sample (something which may not be true of many of their peers) was this: they could be considered *successful* students. As Nieto (1992, 1994) points out in a similar study, although there may be disagreements about what it means to be successful, the students in my sample have been able to develop both academic skills and positive

attitudes about themselves and about the value of education. They generally had excellent grades, and they enrolled in and graduated from Alberta's post-secondary institutions. In fact, all but two were enrolled at the University of Alberta. Two have actually completed a first degree. In retrospect, I agree with Nieto's observation that "it seemed logical that students who are successful in school are more likely to want to talk about their experiences than those who are not" (Nieto 1992, 11).

To seek answers to the questions posed by the research, I utilized a qualitative research method. With the help of an interview guide, I conducted in-depth personal interviews with the twelve informants. My questions were not necessarily structured as interview questions, as I permitted questions to emerge from my discussions and interactions with the participants. Indeed, I gave informants the opportunity to introduce new themes that would throw light on the African-Canadian experience in Alberta schools. There were both individual and focus group interviews. In the former, each student participated in about an hour-long, semi-structured interview. In the latter, I used the interviews to encourage students to build on and react to comments of their peers, creating a dialogue around each question. I used open-ended questions in both the individual and focus group interviews because they are "important when you want to determine the salience or importance of opinions to people, since people tend to mention those matters that are important to them" (cited in Spencer 1995, 17). Data from the individual and focus group interviews were further supplemented and corroborated by secondary data to give a holistic picture of the African-Canadian school experience in Canada. There was so much interest in the subject matter that it led to many hours of non-structured, informal conversations and discussions after the structured interviews. Because some of these informal conversations contained important information that was not recorded during the structured interviews, I wrote and kept a notebook for later use. In the end, the study used four distinct sources of data: (1) twelve individual interviews with students; (2) two focus group interviews with students; (3) personal notes based on informal conversations and discussions; and (4) summary and reading notes from a variety of secondary published, written material. All these personal memos, observer comments, conversations, and interview transcripts make up what has been referred to as the case study data base (Yin 1984). The student interviews generated perceptions about ethnic and racial identity, self-esteem, personal academic expectations and achievements, home-cultural expectations, multiculturalism, racism, stereotypes, parental influence, knowledge of African-Canadian culture and history, school experiences, peer groups, extracurricular activities, and more.

My overall data analysis drew on the student narratives, as well as relevant secondary sources and my own experiences. The theoretical and empirical support for my study came from the broader theoretical framework of schooling,

education and social reproduction theories, multicultural/anti-racist education, race/class and social conflict, sociology of education, international and global education, Black sociology, and sociological/political analysis of the experiences of racial and cultural minorities in the West.

Finally, a note about terminology is necessary. The term preferred by the students in this study and that many used to describe themselves is *African-Canadian*. For them, “the African-Canadian construct serves as a powerful internal redefinition of racial and ethnic pride – a statement of pride in being both Canadian and African” (Dei 1994, 4).

Before using the student narratives as supporting evidence for my thesis, an overview of some theoretical perspectives is in order.

KNOWLEDGE, KNOWLEDGE CONSTRUCTION, AND POSITIONALITY

I rely primarily on works by Banks (1993, 1995, 1996, 2002) to present the concepts of knowledge, positionality, and how knowledge is constructed. Like Banks, I define knowledge to mean a way a person explains or interprets reality. In this conceptualization, “knowledge is ... used the way in which it is usually used in the sociology of knowledge literature to include ideas, values, and interpretations” (Banks 1993, 5). Consequently, I share his view and those of other social scientists (e.g., Code 1991; Ladner 1973) that knowledge is socially constructed and reflects human interests, values, and action. Banks further explains that

Although many complex factors influence the knowledge that is created by an individual or group, including the actuality of what occurred, the knowledge that people create is heavily influenced by their interpretations of their experiences and their positions within particular social, economic, and political systems and structures of a society. (1993, 5)

However, when viewed within Western social and political thought, knowledge and knowledge construction have often been presented as *neutral* and *objective*, and therefore, *universal*. This has meant, for example, that “the ideal within each academic discipline is the formulation of knowledge without the influence of the researcher’s personal or cultural characteristics,” and that “the effects of values, frames, or references, and the normative positions of researchers and scholars are infrequently discussed within the traditional empirical paradigm that has dominated scholarship and teaching in [North] American colleges and universities since the turn of the century” (Banks 1993, 5). Although this type of *hegemonic knowledge* promotes the interests of the powerful, elite groups have often and successfully obscured its value premises by promoting knowledge as totally objective. It has taken on the form of an *ideological* process that has come to serve the interests of particular classes and social groups and come to

constitute the context for power and domination in society (Apple 1990; Dei and James 1998). In fact, Banks (2002, 12) notes that “knowledge is viewed as most influential when it reinforces the beliefs, ideologies, and assumptions of the people who exercise the most political and economic power within a society.” Knowledge, then, “does not transcend, but is rooted in, and shaped by, specific interests and social arrangements” (Code, cited in Banks 2002, 11). Bank’s analysis is compelling, particularly in linking the conception of power/knowledge found in the work of Foucault (1980) and others. In this analysis, it is noted “how power is expressed in boundaries and positions, between the *thinkable* and the *unthinkable*, and how, at its most general, *power* is to silence as *control* is to communication” (Morrow and Torres 1995, 197).

It is no wonder, then, that there has been “the requestioning of entrenched subjective positions/reasonings and assumptions about power” (Dei and James 1998, 92) as it relates to knowledge and knowledge construction. Critical and postmodern theorists have developed important critiques of empirical knowledge and pointed out that personal, cultural, and social factors influence the formulation of knowledge, even when objective knowledge is the ideal within a discipline. Despite its claims, they argue that “modern science is not value-free but contains important human interests and normative assumptions that should be identified, discussed, and examined” (cited in Banks 1993, 5). Myrdal, for example, has stated that valuations are not just attached to research, but permeate it: “There is no device for excluding biases in social sciences other than to face the valuations and to introduce them as explicitly stated, specific, and sufficiently concretized value premises” (cited in Banks 1993, 5). Code, a feminist epistemologist, also states that academic knowledge is both subjective and objective, and that both aspects should be recognized and discussed. She argues that we need to ask questions, such as, “Out of whose subjectivity has this ideal [of objectivity] grown? Whose standpoint, whose values does it represent?... The point of the questions is to discover how subjective and objective conditions together produce knowledge, values, and epistemology. It is neither to reject objectivity nor to glorify subjectivity in its stead. Knowledge is neither value-free nor value-neutral; the processes that produce it are themselves value-laden; and these values are open to evaluation” (cited in Banks 1993, 5).

In sum, knowledge is both subjective and objective, and the knowledge constructed “by the knower reflects both her[his] subjectivity and the objective phenomena perceived” (cited in Banks 1995, 15). Indeed, objective and subjective factors influence knowledge construction, and so “people perceive and understand the world based on their experiences and previous knowledge; they construct their understandings of the world by interpreting new information based on what they already know and believe. Two basic assumptions underlie knowledge construction: (1) there is no single truth, and (2) reality is defined by positionality” (Ovando and Gourd 1996, 298). The theme of *positionality* is relevant here, as it points to the concept that knowledge is only “valid when it

takes into account the knower's specific position in any context, a position that is always defined by gender, race, class, and other socially significant dimensions" (Maher and Tetreault 1994, 22). Put another way, "one's location in the social structure is based partially on the relations of race, social class, and gender," and "race, gender, sexuality, and class differences influence how knowledge is constructed, interpreted, and institutionalized.... Knowledge is valid when it is contextualized in the knower's subject position and location" (Dei and James 1998, 92). Finke further explains that

[w]hat is perceived as marginal at any given time depends on the position one occupies ... In other words, you have to see centrality and marginality, oppression, oppressor, and oppressed as relational concepts. And so what you have to do is keep the whole thing moving ... keep seeing it as relational, keep seeing it as position. (Maher and Tetreault 1994, 22)

When it comes to positionality and knowledge construction, then, I share Banks' (1993, 5) point of view that "positionality means that important aspects of our identity, for example, our gender, our race, our class, our age ... are markers of relational positions rather than essential qualities. Their effects and implications change according to context ... [P]ositionality reveals the importance of identifying the positions and frames of reference from which scholars and writers present their data, interpretations, analyses, and instruction." This means that to understand how knowledge is constructed, "we must not only be aware of the knowledge produced, but must also understand that the knowledge producer is located within a particular social, economic, and political context of society" (Banks 1995, 15). This would explain why,

[f]or many years, and not so long ago, the voices of the majority of people in our society were missing from the books in libraries and on our course reading lists. The experiences of women from all racial and ethnic groups, regardless of their class position, were missing, as was the history, culture, and experience of many men. In their place were the writings and teachings of a relatively small group – predominantly privileged, White, and male – who offered their experience and their perspective as if it were universal ... White sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists set themselves up as experts on American Indian, Hispanic, Black, and Asian experience and culture ... Novels chronicling the growth of manhood of young White males from upper or middle classes were routinely assigned in high schools and college English courses and examined for *universal themes*, while novels about the experiences of men of colour, working people, and women of all groups were relegated to *special interest* courses and treated as marginal ... In short, by definition, serious scholarship, *real science*, and *great literature* was what had been produced by well-to-do, White males

and often focused exclusively on their experiences; accounts of the lives of other groups, if available at all, were rarely written by members of those groups. (Rothenberg 2004, 333–34)

We can conclude that, in this regard, Canadian society is fundamentally unequal, and this inequality is perpetuated by limiting the access of subordinate groups to political, economic, and social power. It explains and answers the following questions: What counts as knowledge? What knowledge is of most worth? Whose knowledge is it? This will be an appropriate way to segue into my discussion on the *Western Canon*. It is, in my view, a concrete example of *official knowledge* representing the ideological configurations of the dominant group. It is relevant to the thesis of this chapter and goes to the heart of the debate about multiculturalism in societies like Canada.

Knowledge Construction and the Western Canon

In recent times, conservative commentators in North America have attacked attempts by peoples of colour, for example, in the case of people of African descent, to “develop a new, empowered sense of self-worth, new curricula [that] are needed [to] reflect Black experience and incorporate learning about African roots and African cultural achievement” (Sardar and Davies 2002, 141). It is a demand for a system of social justice and the redistribution of power that is more inclusive, especially regarding what is taught in schools, especially as it pertains to “a redefinition of self, an assertion of power, and a rejection of others’ ability to impose an identity” (Rosenblum and Travis 2000, 6). It is a debate about what knowledge related to ethnic and cultural diversity should be taught in the school and university curriculum.

Multicultural education and neo-conservative critics like Ravitch and Finn (1987), Hirsch (1987), Bloom (1987), D’Souza (1991), and Schlesinger (1991) have argued that this attempt to make curricula more inclusive “dilutes *real* civilization”. For these authors,

Western civilization constructed not only terrestrial empires and colonies but also an intellectual empire in which it alone exemplified the proper meaning and use of reason, objectivity, and adherence to universal concepts and principles, the routine procedures of its disciplines of knowledge. Therefore, Western civilization has always known the reality, history, and ideas of other civilizations better than they have known themselves. By definition, then, other societies and their cultural manifestations are not universal, and to make them the basis of modern education is to depart from the path of human progress and debase the currency of education. (Sardar and Davies 2002, 141)

Others, like Williams are so unabashed that they have boldly claimed that “Western values are superior to all others” and that “Western values of reason and individual rights have produced unprecedented health, life expectancy, wealth, and comfort for the ordinary person” (Williams 2002, 4A). Therefore, knowledge, or what Banks has called “mainstream academic knowledge,” *must* “reflect the established, Western-oriented canon that has historically dominated university research and teaching in [North America]” (Banks 1993, 7). In fact, these critics have initiated a concerted effort to defend the dominance of Western civilization in the school and university curricula and have “chastised professors who fail to teach the *truth* that civilization itself is best exemplified in the West, and indeed, in [North] America” (Foner 2002). They believe that “Western history, literature, and culture are endangered in the school and university curriculum because of the push by feminists, ethnic minority scholars, and other multiculturalists for curriculum reform and transformation” (Banks 1993, 4). Couched in Flecha’s (1999) concept of *modern racism*, it legitimizes a global order in which White supremacy and European domination are prevalent. This is why, historically, *Canadian* has meant White, as many of us African-Canadians learn when we are asked, “Where do we come from?”, or “When will we be going back to where we came from?”, and when we are complimented on our English- or French-speaking abilities.

Knowledge Construction and the African World Experience

From the above discussion, by implication, African peoples “have not contributed to the rise of civilization,” and “there was nothing in Africa except Egypt, and Egypt was White, not Black” (Farrell 1991, 20). In the history of Western thought, the idea of Africa and Africans as *uncivilized*, *primitive*, and *savage* has permeated the fabric of Western society (Eze 1997). In fact, there is a general neglect and disparagement of Africans. Writings by European philosophers, such as Voltaire, Hume, Kant, Hegel, and Locke, “played a strong role in articulating Europe’s sense not only of its cultural but also racial superiority. In their writings ... *reason* and *civilization* became almost synonymous with *White* people and northern-Europe, while *unreason* and *savagery* were conveniently located among non-Whites, the *Black*, the *Red*, and the *Yellow*, outside Europe” (Dei 1999, 20). This “enlightenment philosophy,” as Eze (1997) has argued, “was instrumental in codifying and institutionalizing both the scientific and popular European perceptions of the human race” (Eze 1997, 5) and defined *valid* knowledge and normalcy. Thus, as Hexham pointed out, “while it is usual to regard the Enlightenment as a period of reform and progress, it was anything but progressive for Blacks. A good case can be made that modern racism originates in the Enlightenment” (Hexham 2002).

In his short essay *The Negro*, the French philosopher Voltaire set the general tone in that age of enlightenment with this position towards Africans:

The Negro race is a species of men as different from ours as the breed of spaniels is from that of greyhounds ... if their understanding is not of a different nature from ours, it is at least greatly inferior. They are not capable of any great application or association of ideas, and seem formed neither of the advantages nor abuses of our philosophy. (cited in Hexham 2002)

English philosopher David Hume agreed when he wrote that “I suspect that Negroes ... [are] naturally inferior to Whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than Whites” (cited in Goldberg 1993, 31–32). And the German philosopher Hegel probably did not hesitate to write that

[t]he peculiarly African character is difficult to comprehend ... In Negro life, the characteristic point is the fact that consciousness has not yet attained to the realization of any substantial objective existence ... The Negro, as already observed, exhibits the natural man in his completely wild, untamed state. We must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality. Among Negroes, moral sentiments are quite weak, or more strictly speaking, non-existent ... At this point we leave Africa to mention it no more. For it is no Historical part of the World. (Hexham 2002)

These racist ideas led to the lack of recognition and identification of the biases, assumptions, perspectives, and points of view that have frequently victimized Africans because of the stereotypes and misconceptions that were perpetuated about them in the historical and social science literature. An example of this bias became evident when, in the autumn of 1990, the Encyclopedia Britannica published the *Great Books of the Western World*, its selection of Western civilization’s sixty best works. Commentators hailed the selection as an affirmation of Western culture. Indeed, a scholarly symposium at the United States Library of Congress celebrated the collection’s publication. Amid the celebration, some critics pointed out that the series contained no books by authors of colour. An obvious omission, it was suggested, were the writings of W.E.B. DuBois, which should have been included in the selection. In response, Mortimer Adler, a self-proclaimed interpreter of the Western canon, opined that no Black had ever written a great book. Specifically addressing DuBois’ exclusion, Adler argued that DuBois’ best book was his autobiography “which simply failed to meet the inclusion criteria in the series” (Farrell 1991, 20). This is why “in canonical literature, [Africans] have always been spoken for. Or have been spoken to. Or have appeared as jokes or as flat figures suggesting sensuality” (Chavanu 1996, 1). It explains, for example, why there is a major Holocaust museum in Washington, DC, but no such memorial exists for African-Americans anywhere in North America. And it explains why *The Bell Curve*, a book by Herrnstein and Murray (1994) that is riddled with

racism and argues that African-Americans have less intellectual ability than Whites was on the *New York Times* best-seller list for several weeks. It echoed and gave academic legitimacy to many of the institutionalized beliefs about African peoples within North American society. Against this background, I would like now to present one part of the results of a research study chronicling the experiences of African students in Canadian secondary schools. It provides a concrete example of the distortions purposely done to create the illusion that Africans have been of little consequence in world history. For Africans in Canada, it seems like a fight for survival in a society that continuously constructs them as *the other*.

AFRICAN-CANADIANS, POSITIONALITY, AND BIASES IN KNOWLEDGE CONSTRUCTION

African-Canadian culture is often relegated to an inferior status by schools, thus hiding our group's true, historic struggle for survival, liberation, and enhancement. On the one hand, the suppression, destruction, distortion of a group's history and culture by others, and the surrender of one's own culture results in low self-esteem. On the other hand, ignorance and disrespect for African-Canadian history and culture breed low expectations and unhealthy educator assessments of African [Canadian] students, personalities, and potential. (Black Learners Advisory Committee [BLAC] 1994)

As my opening quotation demonstrates, perhaps no other area in the education of Black students in Canada attracts more concern than does attention on the curriculum. As James and Brathwaite (1996, 29) correctly note, "curriculum concerns are some of the most damaging elements in our students' schooling, and this is an area that has attracted much attention in the Black community and among educators." Not surprisingly, it was also an area that generated the most discussion and sometimes anger and emotion among the students in my study. In fact, the question of racial bias in the curriculum content, as well as eurocentrism in school courses and texts, were also recurring themes in the student narratives. All complained that the curriculum had little relevance for their lives and, as one of them put it,

I really didn't feel as though I got any education from school as far as Black education was concerned ... I didn't learn anything about Black history in high school. There was no subject [in Black studies] for you to take, and in regular social studies classes, they didn't discuss anything Black or African. They might have said something about slavery once or twice but they didn't really say anything in depth and they didn't say anything positive. (Codjoe 1997, 172)

This theme was echoed again and again by the students. Having grown up in West Africa before immigrating to Alberta with her parents, Akosua (I have used pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of the students) thought courses in Canadian schools would be more inclusive and reflect its entire people. However, she found out in high school that

Canadian history just seems to be concerned about White Canada. Except, maybe, the States, because they're so close to the States, they're not really concerned about other countries. I never knew anything about the history of Blacks in Canada until I joined Ebony [a Black youth club in Edmonton]. That's when I started to realize, "Oh, Blacks have been here for this long. I've talked to some Black families, too, here in Alberta and found that their roots have been here for a long time, and it's like I never knew." (Codjoe 1997, 172)

Another student, Kwabena, born outside of Canada, found that

[a] lot of the history was about World War I, World War II – European history. There was very little African history. You find that a lot of the students hardly knew anything about Africa whatsoever. All they knew was what they saw on TV or what portrayed Blacks in the most negative way. (Codjoe 1997, 172)

Kweku, also born outside of Canada, found this Eurocentric emphasis "frustrating" at times,

because we heard so much about the French and English and stuff. Amazingly, they don't even talk very much about the Natives. You'd think there'd be a lot more on that. It is frustrating because, I mean, the Blacks here did contribute a lot. We [Blacks] were one of the first immigrants here in Canada. I do feel that there should be a lot more mentioned about us, most definitely. (Codjoe 1997, 173)

This last point was often mentioned by the African students born in Canada. They are hurt by what one of them, echoing Willis (1995), called "a sin of omission." For example, Abena, born here in Alberta, narrated that

in some of my classes [e.g.] in social studies, when they did mention anything that had to do with Black people, it was generally that the Blacks came over. They were slaves. In English, you'd read a book, Tom Sawyer or something, and it is "Nigger this, Nigger that," every second word, and I found that, in the end, I started to verbalize "Why do you always portray the negative aspects of Black life?" I found that a lot of my teachers just

would almost automatically say something, and they'd turn to me because they would expect me to give them a response because I wasn't going to be quiet about it. So, I thought it just made me more outspoken in the end, which was to my benefit. It made me learn more about Black history on my own than in school. (Codjoe 1997, 173)

Kwadjo, also born in Alberta and trying to make some sense of this, said he does not think that “the big problem is that the teachers are hidden Klansmen, [although] you still find teachers who have really bigoted attitudes and that sort of thing.” He believes that “the real problem is that we're just invisible to the curriculum.” He explains further:

I took social studies in high school and the history course – that was supposed to be an enriched history course. The history course was actually subtitled “History of Western Europe.” They didn't even make a secret out of it. So all the civilizations of the earth that were brown were left out. We didn't discuss China until the twentieth century. The first mention of Africans was not Egypt, or Nubia, or Mali, or Songhai, or great Zimbabwe. The first mention was the slave holocaust, which was called the slave trade. (Codjoe 1997, 173–74)

On this last point, it also came out unanimously during the focus group discussions that Black education in Alberta's schools, if mentioned at all, “tends to start and stop with Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. That's about it. There are a whole lot of other historical Black figures – music, science, you name it. Even in this country alone, there are a lot nobody knows about” (Codjoe 1997, 174). I was curious to know how all this made them feel in class and school, and so I asked them to tell me about it. Interestingly enough, although they were hurt and marginalized by the whole experience (one dropped out of school because of it, although returned later), most told me they were not surprised. They had expected it. They had been forewarned. As Alberta-born Abena said,

I wasn't really surprised because I remember actually being told by someone before I went to [mentions school attended], I was told, “You're not going to learn anything about Black education.” In fact, they said something about how the teachers there weren't very fond of Black students. (Codjoe 1997, 174)

In fact, during the focus group discussions with students, many said they were “furious” because “if you're willing to learn about other cultures, my culture might as well be known, too” (Codjoe 1997, 174). A few got into arguments with their teachers. Kwame, born in Alberta, relates one such experience:

One time, I got into a big argument with a teacher. We were doing the history of the world. When it came to the history of Africa, the teacher said Africa's history started from 1773 [*sic*] when the White man came. I said this is foolishness. Africa's history didn't start with the arrival of the White man. I pointed out to the teacher that when it came to do the history of Russia, he talked about way back in when they were still in [inaudible], that's their history. But when he talked about the history of Africa, the only thing he talked about was when the White man came. That's my experience with Black things in Alberta's schools. Always, it's not Black things. It's when the White people came and how the Black people kind of fitted in. That's about it. (Codjoe 1997, 174–75)

But perhaps the most important aspect mentioned by the students was the damage the impact of the absence of African studies in the school has on Black students. This comment by Kofi, an African immigrant, was typical:

There was nothing on anything that was Black-related or Black-successful in the academic area. I think if there was, even if it was just a small thing, a Black child would feel that they had something to associate themselves with in the academic sense. This would make them more motivated to achieve as well, because right now, they just feel that maybe some kids feel that education is a White thing. But it's [education] not something that they should be ashamed of. (Codjoe 1997, 175)

This was echoed by Eku, born in Alberta of mixed African and Canadian parentage, who added that

I'm no academic genius, but when you have a sense of what your people have done, it helps you get through the school system, too. It helps you get through different things because you feel that your people have made a contribution to where you are. (Codjoe 1997, 175)

What I found remarkable about these students was that, though the schools made no effort to introduce or teach them about African studies, they made the effort on their own, and as one said, "I learned about Black history more on my own than in school" (Codjoe 1997, 175). Some regretted this and commented that it's not fair that they should have to learn their own history outside school, when European history is being taught in school.

As can be seen from the above student narratives, the curriculum in Canadian schools is at odds with the experiences, backgrounds, hopes, and wishes of students of African descent. The continued marginality of these students within the school system has created a situation in which African-Canadian students

lack any sense of identification and connectedness to the school. Canada's schools have failed to respond to the direct needs of the African-Canadian student and to incorporate African peoples' history and experiences into the existing curriculum. This "sin of omission," as Willis calls it, has "[allowed] the cultural knowledge of culturally and linguistically diverse children to be ignored, devalued, and unnurtured as valid sources of literacy acquisition" (Willis 1995, 34). According to Giroux, "the issue here is that the school actively silences students by ignoring their histories; ... by refusing to provide them with knowledge relevant to their lives" (1986, 10). It becomes depressing when one discovers that this situation is not unique to the African-Canadian students interviewed for my study. Indeed, my research findings on this topic are shared by many others. For example, in her interviews with other Black students in Edmonton, Spencer concluded that "the pinnacle of discontent for all groups of Black students was the heavy emphasis on European history in the social studies curriculum" (1995, 110). Among the students Spencer interviewed, there was a general perception that the social studies curriculum portrayed Black people as "passive, rather than active, participants in society" (1995, 111). Where Blacks were represented in the curriculum, the students perceived it as often in negative terms.

At a conference of Black youth in Edmonton in March, 1995, to commemorate the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, conference participants also said the Alberta school curriculum does not reflect the cultural diversity of Canada. Echoing the students in my study, the following were typical comments: "The school curriculum is designed to put *Whites first*; Blacks are non-existent; the school curriculum portrays Blacks as slaves, not as accomplished people" (Lendore-Mahabir 1995, 8). A teacher at the Black Heritage School in Calgary was surprised to discover that some Black students arrive at the school never having read a book written by, or about, a Black person (Adams 1993). On this, another teacher also observed that: "A Black kid can go through five years of high school and never read a Black author. This is an era when the 1992 Nobel prize for literature was won by Toni Morrison, and the 1993 prize for poetry by Derek Walcott" (cited in Ruby 1995, A21). It is no wonder that "an examination of Alberta texts revealed in 1984 that there still were anti-minority biases in books across Alberta" (Kilgour 1994, 7). In fact, according to Winks (1971), in over fifty history texts on the Canadian market by 1960, not one published after 1865 makes the slightest reference to Canada's Black population (see also Hill 1960).

Underscoring the points raised by these Black students and those I interviewed for my study is the observation made by Henry and Tator that "from the perspective of the educational institutions themselves, the issue which has been the focal point of multicultural and race relations policies and practices has been the curriculum" (1991, 16). The weight of the school curriculum in the education of Black students is thus recognized by educators and by recent

studies. For example, an entire section of the *Draft Report on the Education of Black Students in Toronto Schools* is devoted to a discussion of curriculum matters. The report notes that “The inclusion of Black Studies in the regular curriculum, some parents say, would enhance the self-respect of Black students and generate the respect of teachers and other students for Blacks. At the same time, the inclusion of Black Studies as an optional credit course at the secondary level would be of interest not only to Black students but to other students in the same way that languages and cultures of other people are of interest to persons of different backgrounds” (cited in Brathwaite 1989, 209; see also O’Malley 1992 and Aoki et al. 1984). Another report noted that “[o]ften [in] schools in which the student population is predominantly Black ... the school curriculum is largely reflective of European presence, settlement, and development of Canada and, as such, provides little or no incentive for Black Canadians to develop their African heritage. Courses in Black history, a spotlight on Black achievements, an appreciation of Black culture – these are things for which the African-Canadian student hungers, often in vain” (Towards a New Beginning 1992, 78).

There is a feeling among Black educators, as well as African-Canadian students and parents, that because the school curriculum is one of the most important elements of education and is the carrier of the philosophy, culture, and national agenda of any country, the mismatch between African-Canadian students’ cultures and that of Canadian schools goes a long way to “reinforce feelings of limited self-worth and cultural isolation by ignoring the historical contributions of African-Canadians or devaluing their culture” (Black Learners Advisory Committee 1994, 41 [hereafter BLAC 1994]; see also Bristow et al. 1994 and Walker 1980). The culture in Canadian schools, according to Hoo Kong, is that “in general, textbooks tend to present the perspectives of White, upper-class, Anglo- and French-Canadian males. Consequently, many textbooks do not acknowledge African-Canadians as active participants in the shaping of our nation’s history” (Hoo Kong 1996, 58). Adds the *BLAC Report on Education*, “When you examine the Nova Scotia curriculum, the Black community hardly seems to exist at all” (BLAC 1994, 41). Richardson echoes the same point when he writes that “The shelves of the history and social issues sections of Canadian bookstores have long been devoid of books by and about Canadians of African descent. Indeed, one might infer from public school history and social studies texts that Black people have had nothing to contribute to Canadian society” (1995, 36). And on the “350th Anniversary of Blacks in Canada,” Hill and Bruner aptly note that

The history of Canada, according to the usual view of history, is told in White and Red: White for larger-than-life creators of momentous events; Red for the native Indians. But a deeper look reveals another distinct colour – Black. There is an almost total void in knowledge of Black heroes,

coloured commandos who defended Canada against the Americans in the 1780s on the Detroit frontier; of Black politics, Tories who rallied against William Lyon Mackenzie's 1837 rebels; of religious development, establishment of the Baptist faith by runaway slaves; of Black slaves, who were both bound and freed on Canadian soil. (1978, 10)

In reference to these important omissions from Canadian school curricula, Winks further observes that

Indeed, most White Canadians would not have learned that there were Negroes in Canada at all had they relied upon their formal schooling. Textbooks forgot that Black men existed after 1865, and only a few Canadian books gave even passing reference to the influx of fugitive slaves in the 1850s. Most did not mention Canada's own history of slavery, and none referred to Negroes – or separate schools – after discussing the American Civil War. C. D. Owen's 1842 text for use in Nova Scotian schools contained a single reference to the long Negro involvement with the province: Blacks "are perpetually begging and receiving charity." In the twentieth century, those few books which purported to discuss social problems for a school-age audience were imported from the United States, and readers not unnaturally assumed that the racial problems revealed in such books were unique to the Republic. (1971, 363)

The impact of this exclusion from the curriculum on Black learners has been analyzed by numerous educators and effectively summed up by Asante as follows: "Lacking reinforcement in their own historical experiences, they [Black students] become psychologically crippled, hobbling along in the margins of the European experiences of most of the curriculum" (cited in BLAC 1994, 40). As a matter of fact, the monocultural content of the school curriculum, including testing and grouping practices, as well as the expectations of educators for Black and minority children, have been established as the major barriers to educational achievement and equality (King 1993). On this point, a 1995 report by the Black Learners Advisory Committee in Nova Scotia, *A Legacy of Inequality*, noted that Black students suffer and fail in the school system because little is said about the contributions of Blacks to the development of the province (cited in *The Globe and Mail*, 1995). It lends support to what the National Alliance of Black School Educators has aptly observed: "Academic excellence cannot be reached without cultural excellence" (cited in BLAC 1994, 18).

The "persistent *invisibility* of Black studies and Black history within the [Canadian school] curriculum" (Yon 1994, 124), as shown above, has been described by Hoo Kong as "exclusionary history" – "the conscious and/or unconscious omission of historical perspectives that conflict with Anglo-Canadian males' interpretation and representation of past events and people,

as well as the omission of ethnic or racial groups, such as Black Canadians, from history textbooks” (1996, 59). This exclusionary history also reveals how African-Canadian students are affected by the subtle forms of racism reflected in the school’s curriculum. Indeed, in their book, *Teaching Prejudice*, McDiarmid and Pratt (1971) indicate that prejudicial attitudes and negative references to Blacks are widespread in the textbooks used in Ontario schools. So, when all is said and done, we currently have in Canadian schools what Asante calls “a White self-esteem curriculum – that is, a curriculum that, by design or effect, reinforces White students’ self-esteem” (Asante 1992, 21). The dogma says that Western (European) knowledge is the sum total of what students should learn. That’s why “in many schools, learning starts not with what students bring to class, but with what is considered *high-status knowledge*, that is, the *canon*, with its overemphasis on European and European [Canadian] history, arts, and values. This seldom includes the backgrounds, experiences, and talents of [Black and minority] students in schools” (Nieto 1994, 399). Regarding the subtle forms of racism reflected in this kind of curriculum, Maclear poses this question: “In classrooms, where the absence of African-Canadians in curricular content is still more the rule than the exception, what messages are being sent to Black students as to their participation in Canadian society?” (1994, 66).

CONCLUSION

To sum up and corroborate the thesis of this chapter, I would argue that the *exclusionary curriculum* discussed above constitutes a *hidden curriculum*, because it “often reinforces [Canadian] society’s prejudicial view that [African] students ... are incapable and inferior” (Irvine 1990, 8). According to Irvine, “the hidden curriculum is the *unstated but influential knowledge*, attitudes, norms, rules, rituals, values, and beliefs that are transmitted to students through structure, policies, processes, formal content, and the social relations of school” (1990, 5; emphasis added). This hidden curriculum, separate from the “formal curriculum” or what is actually taught in schools, also refers to “the different beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, and expectations that teachers bring to the school with them,” and particularly, “the different social relations that are formed and the underlying organizational structures and practices of schooling” (Yon 1994, 139). Further, I agree with Yon that “the hidden curriculum has received less attention than the formal curriculum, because it addresses what is essentially intangible, the very *ethos* of schooling that is difficult to pin down” (139). My point here, again agreeing with Yon (1994, 134), is that, in Canada, “the school’s hidden curriculum can cause students to feel marginalized. This is the aspect of schooling through which the subtle and sometimes unintentional forms of racism manifest themselves.”

For example, in a “personal reflection” on “Confronting a History of Exclusion,” Hoo Kong made the following observation to illustrate the “sometimes unintentional forms of racism”: “By ignoring or omitting the faces and experiences of African-Canadians in a society where race is often used to define people, the history curriculum not only alienated me from what I was supposed to believe was the history of my country, but also rendered me, a Black female, as a non-contributing *newcomer*” (Hoo Kong 1996, 62). Similarly, James Walker notes, in *A History of Blacks in Canada: A Study Guide for Teachers and Students*, that in “the Anglo-dominated schools, they [African students] have been taught that the heroes are White, the accomplishments have been attained by Whites, the nation was built by Whites, all of which leaves Blacks as intruders, or at best, hangers-on in a flow of history that ignores them” (cited in Hoo Kong 1996, 62–63). And according to Shadd, many Canadian children are being taught that “Blacks and other People of Colour are newcomers, or worse, *foreigners*, who have no claim to Canadian heritage except through the generosity of immigration officials,” thus creating the “myth that Canada is a *White country*” (1989, 152). This lends credence to the thesis that “the groups who exercise the most power within society heavily influence what knowledge becomes legitimized and widely disseminated” (Banks 2002, 22). Indeed, the nature of what is defined as history underpins this process. I am reminded of Wright’s observation that “we have listened only to the history of the winners,” because the winners, who often are conquerors, write the history that “when it has been digested by a people, becomes myth. Myths are so fraught with meaning that we live and die by them” (1992, 4–5). In fact, in his book *History as Mystery*, Parenti (1999) attacks a number of popular historical myths in an attempt to challenge mainstream history and to show how history’s victors distort, manipulate, and suppress the documentary record in order to perpetuate their power and privilege.

Well, it is time to hear the side of the *losers*. That is why, fortunately, African students and scholars and Black educators in North America are mounting oppositional challenges to the status quo and the dominant paradigm (McLaren and Gutierrez 1994). They follow the tradition of DuBois and others who earlier challenged European and racist assumptions of Africans. The students in my study and other minority youth and women have begun to offer a more systematic challenge to the structure of existing school knowledge and the assumptions and practices that undergird the curricula of schools and universities in northern industrialized societies. For example, they are demanding democratization and diversity in the curriculum and course offerings, in particular, incorporating learning about African roots and African cultural achievement, both on the Continent and in the diaspora; critiquing and challenging racist biases in existing school knowledge; and recruiting and hiring minority teachers and administrators. As Livingstone aptly observes,

[c]ollective reflection by subordinate groups leads to recognition not only of the roles of dominant groups in constructing established beliefs and practices, but also of their own roles in that process and of their own potential power to reconstruct such beliefs and practices. Their own emergent collective critiques of the status quo lead directly to some manner of engagement of alternative possibilities in both conceptual and practical terms. (1987, 8–9)

Wood points out that such a new critical approach would “celebrate the contributions of working people, women, and minorities to our general cultural pool and would be the point of departure for providing students with their own cultural capital” (1998, 177). It is a strategy that proposes to reconstruct the dominant curriculum by bringing the “uninstitutionalized experiences of marginalized minorities ... to the *centre* of the organization and arrangement of the school curriculum” (Wood 1998, 177). Giroux places the debate in proper perspective with this summary:

We live at a time in which a strong challenge is being waged against modernist discourse in which knowledge is legitimized almost exclusively from a European model of culture and civilization. In part, the struggle for democracy can be seen in the context of a broader struggle against certain features of modernism that represent the worst legacies of the Enlightenment tradition. And it is against these features that a variety of oppositional movements have emerged in an attempt to rewrite the relationship between modernism and democracy. (1990, 2)

On this note, I share Dei’s conclusion that “on both analytical and practical levels, [the students’ narratives] bring to the fore the dilemma of searching for an appropriate centrality of the experiences, histories, and cultures of the diverse student body in curriculum and classroom pedagogical practices to facilitate youth learning” (Dei 1996, 57). It is a *transformative* approach to knowledge construction that strives to reach towards a more accurate, more inclusive understanding of Canadian society and its diversity.

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