

**On Malefic Generosity, Repressive Tolerance and Post-Colonial Condescension:  
Considerations on White Adult Educators Racializing Adult Education Discourse**

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**Abstract:** When White adult educators engage with the work of authors of color they often mean to treat these respectfully and to ensure these ideas are not marginalized by other Whites. However, in a racist and sexist society the racial group membership and socio-political location of White authors means they can easily end up promoting malefic generosity, repressive tolerance and post-colonial condescension.

In 2003 I published in *Adult Education Quarterly* an article the journal's editors understandably found "deeply problematic". The piece was titled "Racializing Criticality in Adult Education" (Brookfield, 2003) and explored two approaches to racializing the concept of criticality. This concept (which is central to the field's dominant discourses of critical reflection, critical thinking and transformative learning) was identified as being already racialized as Eurocentric; that is to say that its intellectual origins, constituent elements and most prominent spokespersons were all seen to be White EuroAmericans. The article considered how the concept of criticality could be racialized (interpreted through the lens of another racial group's identity, experiences, concerns and needs) in the interests of African Americans (Colin, 2002). The article attempted this task through analyzing two extant bodies of work - the work of Cornel West and Lucius T. Outlaw who explored a racialized view of critical theory, and the work of Scipio Colin Jr. III and others on Africentric approaches to the field.

On its appearance the editors of the journal noted the "razor's edge" I trod in the piece and opined that my gender and race perhaps precluded my ability to present these perspectives. They asked "what does it say about a field when it takes a White male to discuss Africentric theory? Can our discipline only legitimate its inclusion through the racialized status of the presenter?" They also predicted that its publication "will likely invite scorn and ridicule from some". I was expecting scorn and ridicule as something that comes with the territory of publishing. Of much greater concern to me was that I avoid the intellectual colonialism noted by bell hooks and Cornel West. In their talking book *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* (1991) hooks and West talk of the ways White academics co-opt critiques and arguments made by theorists of color and then reproduce them as if they were their own. In their analysis hooks argues "White theorists draw upon our work and our ideas, and get forms of recognition that are denied Black thinkers" (hooks and West, 1991, p. 36). She speaks of how "there is a feeling now that a White academic might take your idea, write about it, and you'll never be cited" (ibid.). In the same conversation West observes "White scholars are bringing certain baggage with them when they look at Black culture, no matter how subtle and sophisticated the formulations" (ibid.).

It is probably helpful to say something about my reason for writing the piece and for my continuing engagement with this project. The article sprang from my conviction that discussions of race should not be solely the province of authors of color. If only authors of color produce articles, books and papers dealing with race then the White majority can easily marginalize the issue as the province only of non-White adult educators, as something ‘they’ (the generalized non-White ‘other’ whose only distinguishing characteristic is defined as their lack of Whiteness) should take responsibility for exploring. This effectively keeps racial analysis conveniently (for the White majority) on the periphery. But if White adult educators acknowledge and critique their own complicity in a field racialized in favor of EuroAmericans, and if they engage seriously with racialized analyses drawn from a range of racial perspectives – many of which will focus on racism as the salient experience of people of color in a racist country – questions of race and racism cannot so easily be pushed aside by White colleagues.

Focusing on White privilege is crucial work and I support its intent completely. But for Whites to focus exclusively on their own complicity in racism is only one half of the story. I fear that this, once again, positions Whiteness as the thing to be focused on, as the conceptual center. The other project is for Whites to engage seriously with analyses of adult education drawn from other racial group memberships. Whites expect their colleagues of color to be au fait with the Eurocentric intellectual traditions of critical theory, pragmatism, analytic philosophy, positivism, postmodernism and constructivism, all of which assume their position of prominence as the normal, obvious, mainstream modes of analysis in the field because of the power of White Euro-Americans to establish the regimes of truth that apply in a culturally diverse society. In the interests of basic equity, as well as for the intrinsic intellectual and practical enrichment it involves, White adult educators have a duty to immerse themselves in perspectives (such as Africentrism) that racialize the field in the interests of other racial groups.

### *Malefic Generosity*

Malefic or false generosity is defined by Freire as the process by which educators of the privileged class decide what is in the best interests of oppressed learners and proceed to design programs to pursue these. Supposedly emancipatory initiatives to widen adult education’s discourse to include a range of racially based perspectives often spring from sincere efforts by Whites to acknowledge their discomfort at the predominance of an unproblematized Eurocentrism. But the sincerity of the efforts is in no way correlated by how these efforts are perceived by those they are intended to benefit. Indeed, the whole notion of one racial group deciding to benefit another (whether or not the ‘other’ racial group has asked for it) reeks of colonialism, of one group naturally claiming the right to define the territory that constitutes a fully inclusive curriculum. Malefic generosity is often experienced as a patronizing attempt by the White center to empower the margins - when empowerment cannot be given, only claimed. A good example of this is the “add-difference-and-stir approach” that Johnson-Bailey (2002, p. 43) contends characterizes most adult education textbooks published in the last decade. In her view “authors trivialize the significance of race in their authored or edited texts by adding a final chapter that pertains to minority concerns. These chapters are usually offered to placate

the concerns of politically conscious publishers or readers to whom they would not want to appear exclusionary”.

### *Post-Colonial Condescension*

Well-intentioned attempts by White academics to celebrate non-Eurocentric intellectual traditions can easily sour till they reek of post-colonial condescension – the belief that now that Whites have had their consciousness raised regarding racism they can undo the evils of their colonial heritage by redressing the intellectual imbalance created by always centering European traditions. One way this condescension plays itself out is by members of the dominant White society believing they can identify with members of communities of color. By a sheer act of empathic will, by diligently reading narratives of racism written by those who have lived its worst effects, or by making creative connections between their own experiences of ‘discrimination’, some Whites believe they can gain a visceral appreciation of what their colleagues and students of color have experienced. The truth is that White adult educators who empathize with students and colleagues of color in no way enter their worlds.

For example, my own positionality as an English male, and more specifically my own racial membership as White, is an important element to acknowledge in this paper and in my practice. I have learned from years of teaching alongside Scipio Colin III that I must be explicit in acknowledging that I cannot be an Africentric theorist whose being, identity, and practice spring from African values, sensibilities, and traditions. I can appreciate the accuracy and explanatory power of something like Du Bois’ concept of double consciousness. In so doing I can reflect on how being both African and American means that one is “always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois, 1995, p. 45). While this may illuminate what some of my learners and colleagues are experiencing, I can have no real understanding of what it means. As a White Englishman I have no experiential, visceral access to the philosophy born of struggle that comprises the central dimension of African American thought. My skin pigmentation, phenotype, White privilege, and collusion in racism place me irrevocably and irretrievably outside the Africentric paradigm. I can learn from, and honor, this scholarship. I can be grateful for the way such scholarship questions and reformulates aspects of critical theory, or the way it shatters (in a helpful way) my own understanding and practices. But I can never claim to work as an Africentric adult educator. No matter how much I wish to honor this tradition, my racial membership precludes me making such a claim.

Even attempts to deconstruct my White privilege in front of colleagues and students can sometimes serve, paradoxically, to emphasize that privilege. For example, White adult educators who choose not to speak in classes where students and colleagues of color are in the majority (as a means of de-centering the power of a White’s voice) only draw attention to themselves by their silence. Others in the room are left wondering what White faculty ‘really’ think, whether their silence indicates disapproval or approval, or whether it is perhaps a form of surveillance. So, as Shore (2001) notes, “It is too easy for sympathetic self-effacement to become another trick for quiet dominance” (p. 51).

### *Repressive Tolerance*

There is also the problem that White adult educators' attempts to broaden the range of adult educational discourses can perversely serve to underscore the implicit legitimacy of Eurocentrism. This is what Herbert Marcuse (1965) called repressive tolerance.

Repressive tolerance ensures that an apparent embrace of a different perspective serves only to neuter that same perspective. In one of the essays within critical theory that is truly unsettling to contemporary adult education sensibilities, Marcuse argued that an ever-widening tolerance of diverse epistemologies and traditions always ended up legitimizing an unfair status quo. He mistrusted educators' instinctive preference for presenting students with a diversity of perspectives and then letting them make up their minds about which made the most sense to them. To Marcuse such tolerance was repressive, not liberating. Broadening the perspectives we review (for example, including a module on "The Africentric Paradigm" in a course on "How Adults Learn") makes us feel like we are giving equal weight to radical or alternative ideas, when in fact placing them alongside mainstream ones always dilutes their oppositional qualities.

Repressive tolerance ensures that adults believe they live in an open society and learn in an open classroom characterized by freedom of speech and expression while in reality their freedom is being constricted further and further. By widening curriculum to include a variety of traditions White adult educators in positions of programmatic power may appear to be celebrating all positions. But the history of White supremacy, and the way that language and structures of feeling frame whiteness as the natural, inevitable conceptual center, means that the newly included voices, sensibilities and traditions are always positioned as the exotic other. White adult educators can soothe their consciences by believing progress is being made towards racial inclusion and cultural equity, and can feel they have played their small but important part in the struggle. But as long as these subjugated traditions are considered alongside the dominant ideology, repressive tolerance ensures they will always be subtly marginalized as exotic, quaint, other than the natural center.

Repressive tolerance essentially ensures the continued marginality of minority views by placing them in close, comparative association with dominant ones. As long as the dominant, mainstream perspective is included as one of several possible options for study, its presence inevitably overshadows the minority ones, which will always be perceived as alternatives but never as the natural center to which one should turn. Irrespective of the educator's viewpoint (which may be strongly opposed to dominant ideology), the mere inclusion of that ideology as one option ensures its continued dominance. This is because the mainstream ideology is so pervasive that it operates at a preconscious level shaping our responses to alternatives that are proposed to it.

One reason repressive tolerance works so well is because it masks its repression behind the façade of open even-handedness. Alternative ideas are not banned or even censored. Critical texts are published and critical messages circulated. Previously subjugated knowledges and perspectives (e.g. Africentrism) are inserted into the curriculum. The defenders of the status quo can point to the existence of dissenting voices (such as Marcuse's) as evidence of the open society we inhabit and the active tolerance of a wide

spectrum of ideologies. But the framing of meaning accomplished by hegemony is everything. Sometimes the meaning of radical texts is diluted by the fact that the texts themselves are hard to get or incredibly expensive. More likely the radical meanings are neutered because our previous ideological conditioning means they are subtly framed as the expressions of obviously weird minority opinion.

The contemporary discourse of diversity, of opening up the field of adult education to diverse voices, perspectives, and traditions, can be analyzed quite effectively using the idea of repressive tolerance. Marcuse alerts us to the possibility that this apparent broadening of voices can actually reinforce the ideology of White supremacy that it purports to undercut. By widening curriculum to include a variety of traditions, we appear to be celebrating all positions. But the history of White supremacy and the way that language and structures of feeling frame Whiteness as the natural, inevitable conceptual center means that the newly included voices, sensibilities, and traditions are always positioned as the exotic other. Adult educators can soothe their consciences by believing progress is being made toward racial inclusivity and cultural equity, and can feel they have played their small but important part in the struggle. But as long as these subjugated traditions are considered alongside the dominant ideology, repressive tolerance ensures they will always be subtly marginalized as exotic, quaint, other than the natural center.

The only way to promote real tolerance - - liberating or discriminating tolerance in Marcuse's terms - - is to deny learners the chance to consider mainstream perspectives as one possibility among many. Instead of exposing people to a smorgasbord of mainstream and radical perspectives, Marcuse urges educators to practice true tolerance by allowing students exposure only to alternative views and dissenting traditions. The logic of liberating or discriminating tolerance would require an immersion only in a racial or cultural tradition that diverged radically from mainstream ideology; for example, an adult education graduate program that allowed only the consideration of Africentric ideas and perspectives. The logic of repressive tolerance holds that, as long as Africentrism is considered as one of many possible perspectives, including Eurocentrism, it will always be positioned as the marginal alternative to the White supremacist center.

Finally, this paper argues that White adult educators too easily fall into the trap of talking about "the African American perspective" as if there was a unitary, African American philosophy. This perspective shows a lamentable ignorance of the vigorous diversity of intellectual debate amongst African Americans. Skin pigmentation does not produce philosophical unanimity. Although this paper emphasizes an Africentric perspective on adult education it should be unequivocally stated that many African American intellectuals deny that there is any such thing as a unitary, African American philosophy. This is well illustrated in the interviews in Yancy's (1998) *African-American Philosophers* where the editor, George Yancy, eschews any "ontological essentialist foundationalism that forms the sine qua non of African-American philosophical identity and thought" (p. 10). About as far as he will go is to observe that what emerges in his book is "a complex set of philosophical positionalities and thoughts exhibiting areas of commonality and diversity broadly informed by, though not simply reduced to, African-

American culture” (ibid.). There is a wide-ranging debate within African American philosophical circles surrounding the validity of the Africentric philosophical paradigm that illustrates a range of principled positions on the issue. Molefi Asante and Cornel West both write about racism and the African American experience, but one grounds his work in African cultural values, the other in European critical theory and American pragmatism. bell hooks and Angela Davis both draw heavily, like West, on neo-Marxist critical theory informed by contemporary racial analysis. To speak of three colleagues in adult education with whom I have co-taught or co-authored, Scipio Colin Jr. III explores racism from African centered perspective, Elizabeth Peterson from that of critical race theory, and Ian Baptiste from a perspective distinguished by an informed critical eclecticism. So to talk of African American philosophy as if it were a distinctive, unified body of work is inaccurate and condescending. One would not talk of British philosophy as if everyone born in Great Britain with White skin philosophized in the same way. African American philosophy exhibits the same kind of subtlety, difference and disagreement, as does the philosophizing of any other group of people. Whites who do not appreciate this, and who talk about the need for a ‘Black’ perspective on things, torpedo their own good intentions. They display their lack of real study of African American discourse, and they marginalize the discourse they intend to center, by assigning it a false uniformity. The unfortunate implication is that since all Black people are represented as thinking the same way, all we need to do to create racial balance in an adult education program is to add a module on ‘Black’ philosophy.

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