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Being White and Thinking Black: An Interview with Frances Henry

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Introduction

In 1991 Dionne Brand in *No Burden to Carry* expressed the sentiments of many racialized academics when she wrote that “Canadian scholarship overall has been preoccupied with English and French concerns, to the exclusion of Canadian people of non-European origin. This, at best, is xenophobic; it is also racist” (Brand 1991, 11). Racism lies in the absence or marginalization of racialized populations in accounts of Canadian history and society, the use of white Canadians as the norm to which others are explicitly or otherwise compared, the denigration of their “homes” and heritages, and the individual or collective exclusion of racialized peoples through inhospitable attitudes. Historically, the imagined Canada was constructed as a white nation (Hoerder 1999).

In the last decade, a body of literature, written from diverse disciplinary perspectives, has emerged that analyzes the experience of racialized groups such as the Aboriginals, Chinese, South Asians, and blacks. Racism as a subject has also been accorded status and respect in most disciplines and there are many studies that either discuss its meaning, history, and significance or use the race lens to analyze public policies, as for example, immigration, national and border security, and refugees (Li 2004; Aiken 2001, forthcoming; Macklin 2001). Similarly, the history and politics of racialized women have been documented and a substantial body of literature now exists. Frances Henry argues that this literature “has grown enormously but that doesn’t mean it is sufficient. Canadian scholarship on racism is not of the caliber of the writings of Stuart Hall [in Britain] or some important American writings such as those of Paul Gilroy, Patricia Williams,

or even Cornell West. Give it time. We have a generation of young scholars now so it'll continue to grow" (Interview November 2004).

White scholarship on colonized subjects has been criticized as biased and for constructing their culture and society in the image of white Europeans or as Edward Said notes, the "Other" (1978). Such scholarship has been alleged to treat the colonized, subordinate, disempowered culture, group, or society as objects of study and not as participating and engaged subjects. The "truth" about the Other documented in such writings has at the present time generally been thought of as biased, ethnocentric, or plain racist. Critics of these accounts have questioned the privileged position of the author vis-à-vis their subject and made explicit the power relations embedded in such scholarships. Questions have been raised about the dominant group, such as males writing about females, whites about blacks, and heterosexuals about gay and lesbian rights. Disputing the authority of the powerful and the dominant to speak on their behalf, the disempowered and the subordinate struggled to give voice to their understanding and thus play a role in constructing knowledge.

The discourse on race and racism in Canada is multidisciplinary and it has been written by authors of diverse identities. Identity, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, became significant in epistemology and a site of contestation. Initially, identity was viewed as comprising socially significant criteria such as race, gender, class, and sexuality and how they intersected in particular groups and individuals. Identity was not fixed but historical, and since it is constantly negotiated within societies and cultures it is fluid and changing. Subjectivity "encompasses conscious and unconscious dimensions of the self, such as one's sense of who one is in relation to other people" (Henry 2002, 250). I discuss this in greater detail in the introduction to this volume, and note that subjectivity is discursively produced; in other words, that it is created

through a process. It is the affect of conscious and unconscious forces, embodied. It is also an expression (or an affect) of power (Code 2000, 398).

Postmodern analyses, such as that of Judith Butler, cast doubt on the significance of physicality or the body, particularly in discussions of gender and race. Her writings have spawned a debate seeking to reconcile, intellectually and theoretically, the tension between the socially constructed body (meanings imposed upon the body) and essentialism (a set of innate physical differences) (Butler 1990; Weir 2000). The conventional understanding of identity politics proposed solidarity based on commonalities (for example sex among feminists in the 1970s and race among the proponents of civil rights) but its unintended affect was to exclude and silence different perspectives that emerged from racialized women. Identity politics minimized the different social and political contexts in which people lived.

The debate on identity has become further complicated by globalization and migration that have disrupted the “relatively settled character of traditional cultures and collectivities structured around ideas of nationality, race, class and gender” (Proctor 2004, 109). Identity is constructed through participation in global economies that compel individuals to mobilize themselves in their search for economic opportunities, which may take them to different countries sequentially. Transnational migrants participate in different cultures, manifesting their ethnic (group) culture in different locations; consequently their sense of self is fluid as it emerges from such movements. Furthermore, contemporary transnational migrants are not simply acted upon by the dominant society but participate in conscious and deliberate ways to manage perceptions of who they are as well as the meanings attached to their race and culture (Ong 1999).

If identity is not fixed or pure but is contingent, it disrupts the simple binaries of white/black, or male/female. Furthermore, it raises the question, once again, about voice and authority. Who has the right to speak and for whom? If the physical body is not significant in and of itself, then associating voice and authority with an “insider” by virtue of their skin colour or sex is an open and controversial issue. Scholars, such as Bell Hooks and Patricia Collins, have struggled theoretically to give primacy to the “insider” as the knower while at the same time disputing the significance of the physical body (Hooks 2003; Collins 2000). For Hall, as discussed in the introduction of this volume, significance lies not in fixed or conventional criteria like race or sex but in self-reflexivity, recognizing the multiple positionings that are incorporated in an identity, as well as contingency or dependence on social, political, and cultural contexts (Proctor 2004, 119).

In studies of the Diaspora, hybridity and hybrid identities have recently been favoured in defining identity and perspective. A hybrid perspective is neither indigenous nor exogenous (Code 2000, 260). Homi Bhabha views hybridity favourably because it provides a space in which individuals can continually negotiate with the culture in which they find themselves and thereby gain a better understanding of self and society (Bhabha 2000). But others, like Inderpal Grewal and Caren Caplan, are more critical of hybridity because not all facets of such an identity are equal and symmetrical; rather they are uneven because they stem from histories that transcend individual intentionality (1997). The interview with Frances Henry, documented in the following pages, illustrates how subjectivities are constructed and negotiated within and adopted to historical and social circumstance.

The transgression of boundaries by Frances Henry challenges our understanding of the simple white versus black binary. Although she is white, she is married to a black man, has adult

mixed-race children whose appearance is that of light-skinned blacks, and is an academic who studies racism against blacks. She has a distinguished record of research and publication on racism. Henry received her early training as an anthropologist and has maintained an interest in Trinidadian religions, recently publishing *Reclaiming African Religions in Trinidad* (2003). Since her retirement from York University, she lives in Trinidad for part of the year. She is a hybrid but not quite in the way it is generally understood in the literature as being born in one country or within one culture and also participating in the dominant, usually white, culture. Rather, she is a white woman, who is immersed, both personally and professionally, in black culture. In whose voice does she speak? In the following interview, I try to get her to answer that question.

Crossing over boundaries can sometimes marginalize the individual from the communities of their birth or origins as well as their chosen one. For example, immigrants often feel marginalized from the societies that they have left behind but also feel insignificant and inconsequential with respect to the dominant white communities in Canada. Nevertheless, Bhabha argues that marginality is not necessarily disempowering but rather it is a site from which a unique perspective and a different understanding of self and society can emerge (2000). Frances Henry has participated in the black culture in Canada and Trinidad as a wife, mother, scholar, and activist. Her choices have located her at the margins of Jewish and black communities, and at one time, among the social anthropologists. How should we locate the individual vis-à-vis her scholarship, is she an insider or outsider to racism? What is the significance of whiteness for her and how has it affected her scholarship? These are some of the questions that are addressed in the interview.

Frances Henry is Jewish. Until the age of eight, she lived in a small town in Germany and was a victim of Nazis. She has experienced anti-Semitism but does that give her a particular empathy and insight into racism against the blacks? Anti-Semitism, writes Karen Mock, the current director of the Canadian Race Relations Foundation, is “simply hostility directed against the Jews solely because they are Jews” (1996, 120). But Mock answers yes and no to the question on whether anti-Semitism is racism. She explains:

Attacks against Jews come from two distinct sources, religious *and* racial. Therefore, the word ‘racism’ is not wholly applicable; but neither is the term ‘religious intolerance’ sufficient. . . . People of colour are more often subjected to racist attacks and systemic discrimination than are Jews (regardless of their colour or visibility by virtue of dress), it is also true that because of its religious dimension, the hatred directed against Jews differs from that directed against visible minorities. But racism is racism, and . . . [it] is a clear component of anti-Semitism. . . . That it is a consequence of hate mongering is not in question. (1996, 132)

In the acknowledgement to *The Caribbean Diaspora in Toronto: Learning to Live with Racism*, Henry gives us an insight into her feelings. She writes:

I am no stranger to racism. I have felt it personally as a Jewish refugee from Hitler’s Germany where much of my family was wiped out. I have since experienced it as the mother of two Black children growing up and going to school in Canada. . . . Over the years, I have witnessed my husband’s struggles to maintain dignity and decency in the face of sometimes outrageous provocation. (1994, xi)

Do her experiences make Henry sensitive to what it means for blacks to survive, to produce, to labour, and to create their own imaginative world within a culture and society that is sometime hostile to their presence?

I have known Frances Henry, professionally, for several years. I was a junior academic at York University and Frances an established and well-respected scholar in the 1980s. Over the years we have had occasion to meet at conferences on immigration, race, and ethnicity. In Geneva, while attending the Ninth Metropolis Conference on Immigration in 2004, I asked

Frances casually over lunch how she had survived a lifetime of thinking, researching, and writing about race and racism. “Was it difficult?” I enquired. She laughed enigmatically in response. Sensing that perhaps there might be a story worth listening to, I persuaded her to discuss her work formally in an interview with me. A month later we met twice in Toronto at my house and recorded two interviews that were taped and transcribed. I asked her open-ended questions, some of which were blunt, others curious and probing. Frances’s answers record her experiences of being a white, Jewish woman, doing research on racism.

The interview

Vijay: Frances, you are Jewish and your parents and grandparents were victimized during the Nazi treatment of Jews in Germany. Did that give you a particular affinity to working on racism?

Frances: That’s a good place to begin because if you go back into an individual’s history far enough, invariably you find some incidences or experiences that predispose them to work in certain areas. That is very dramatically true for me. I started life as a very severe victim [of racism]. My parents and I got out of Germany at the last possible moment, in March and the war was officially declared in September 1939. The rest of the family didn’t. I published my memories of this time in *Victims and Neighbors: A Small Town in Nazi Germany Remembered* [1984] that describes both the kindness of neighbours and the incremental and horrific prosecution of Jews. The experience of being a victim naturally predisposed me for the rest of my life, to be [empathetic] towards people who feel they have been victimized by other people’s power, even if it may not be so in reality. My personal experiences were fundamental to the kind of research that I eventually did.

My sense of being different, which started in Nazi Germany, continued in the United States. When I arrived there I was eight years old. I was put into school, not knowing a word of English. To the other seven- or eight-year-old kids I was German—that meant I was a Nazi, because they had no understanding of the difference between Nazis, non-Nazis, and Roma. So to little kids, if you're German you're a Nazi and I was continually mocked at for being a German Nazi, plagued [by such taunts], until I was twelve or thirteen. This experience of being Othered, as we would put it today, had a very strong impact on me. I guess that enters in very, very closely to [the kind of research] that I became involved with in later life.

Growing up in the U.S., particularly in Brooklyn, New York, I was surrounded by African Americans [and what the media referred to as] the “black situation”, and the “black problem.” I had personal experiences with black people when I was fairly young; the one that had the most influence on me subconsciously was when I was about nine or ten. My parents had to redo their professional credentials after coming to the U.S. and had very little money. Sending me to a summer camp was out of the question, so for the holidays they would send me to my uncle's chicken farm in New Jersey. A little ways down the road from my uncle's farmhouse was a black family; they didn't own the farm, I think, they were leasing or renting. It was a large family with one or two children of my age. They were the only kids in that area, so, I would go over there to play with them. One of the kids in the family was a girl roughly about my age, and one afternoon we went to the outhouse because they didn't even have a toilet, and stripped down naked. Both of us examined each other and she saw what I had, I saw what she had, and lo and behold it was the same thing. That made an incredible impression on me and [created the] understanding that although she was quite dark skinned and I was white, we had the same

physical and sexual apparatus. That was a huge psychological moment, in my early life, which gave me the realization of what equality is all about.

Growing up in New York it is very easy to become a lefty, sort of left of centre, or socialist. When I was in my teens, Henry Wallace was running for President on a socialist ticket, which happened, I think, for the first time in the U.S. and I don't think it's happened ever since. At the age of thirteen or fourteen, I became an active campaigner for Henry Wallace and his progressive, socialist ideas.

Vijay: Can you describe your intellectual, social, or psychological struggles to decolonize your mind? I mean, sometimes we internalize biases and values of the larger society without realizing it. What has been your experience?

Frances: I didn't really have to do that. I went to Brooklyn College, which, in my time, was the centre of leftist political ideology and of ethnic but not racial diversity. Poor Italian and Central European kids went there. Like all women of my age and generation, I had a lot of anti-female experiences in my student days. But they didn't make me feel inferior; in fact, gave me an impetus to go on. The one that I remember most strikingly was at Brooklyn College when I was in my fourth year as an undergraduate. I was already married to my first husband and I was majoring in European History and it suddenly occurred to me that if I continued as a historian I would be working with documentation and I wanted to work with people. Quite by chance, I came across Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture*. I read that and thought, oh my God, this is what I want to do. So I went to speak to the Chair of the Anthropology department at Brooklyn College, who was an archeologist, and told him that I would like to do graduate work in anthropology. He didn't listen to what I was saying [me].

I was sporting a ring. He had observed that and said, you are already married, you're going to be having children soon, so what is the point of going on for further education in this or any other field? He was rude in a very nasty kind of way. Obviously, that was the end of the conversation. I was furious. I emerged from that incident with a "to hell with you" attitude. I was absolutely determined to go to graduate school in anthropology, and I did. I was never really colonized, in that sense, and when explicit comments were made such as this one, I just came out fighting even harder and being stronger.

Vijay: What about decolonizing your mind about race—you lived amongst blacks, you were familiar with them, but still the larger society has biases.

Frances: Yes. Well, as you know, and it might exist in some quarters today, white women who consort with blacks are seen as prostitutes, whores, or tarts. Some of that [abuse] was thrown directly towards me. I have been an academic all my life. The university is a world in and of its own and you can live within it both professionally and socially without being exposed to the slings and arrows of the outside world. So I was shielded by the university. You know [the abuse] when you see it walking down the street and people stare or make rude comments. I mean, come on, who gives a damn, I really couldn't care less.

There are people who believe that I got into anti-racist research and writing because I was married to a black person. That's not true. My personal ideology was already in place by the time I met my husband, Jeff. The romantic involvement with a black person was not the catalyst; rather it was almost the last thing in a series of events.

Vijay: Did you become involved with the feminist movement in Canada?

Frances: No. I've always felt, from a theoretical point of view, that certain variables are more primary than others at creating social situations and for racialized people, maybe not all but a great many of them, race is the dominant variable in the diasporic situation. Therefore I decided not to split my research interests and to focus on race and racism and to keep immigration and integration as the dominant variables. I haven't really discounted gender; one of the first articles I did in the 1960s was on women domestics in Canada. I have always tried in my research and writing to be as inclusive of gender and class as possible. However, as the racial problems emerged out of the feminist movement, it wasn't exactly conducive to becoming a part of it. At that time I would have been seen as one more dominant white woman who was trying to appropriate the black voice.

Vijay: In the 1980s, the feminist movement was questioned for its racial biases and there were discussions about appropriation, voice, and the privileged position of the insider based on culture, how did you react to that?

Frances: That's a very difficult scenario. I've always had problems with the idea of the insider as the only one who really knows, and still do. Anthropological fieldwork is based on the notion that an outsider goes somewhere, learns enough about a society or group or culture, with the help of local respondents, and is able to make some sense of it. Anthropology got tainted by the criticism that no outsider can really understand [a group, culture, or society]. The insiders got more powerful and began asserting themselves; I also agree with that.

[Many] of our traditions in the social sciences are based upon expropriated, outside, erroneous, biased, and prejudicial knowledge. So, we have to contend with the history of our disciplines, which pretended, in one way or another, to be able to know and to analyze—[and it

became] a privilege of famous white scholars. It's chilling. We're guilty of having expropriated people and everything they stand for, but that doesn't mean we're *all* guilty. It doesn't mean that we can't isolate the good from the bad stuff; nor does it mean that all of us should be excluded on the basis of the sins of the pioneers in these disciplines. But, it's hard to make that argument in the face of people who expose their pain and say that you can't possibly understand. They're dealing with the situation emotionally not analytically. There is a certain degree of distancing you must do or else you can't research, write, or think.

I think both perspectives, that of the insider and the outsider, are valuable and complementary, it is not an either/or situation. An insider may have the pain attached to humiliating experiences which the outsider can only glimpse at, but the skills to analyze where that pain comes from and what it means and how it destabilizes a person, groups, and society can only come from somebody who is trained in a social science discipline.

I have very strong views on the notion of being an insider, and the whole question of appropriation has to be recognized and explored fully, but that does not exclude analysis by outsiders.

Vijay: In the 1970s, did your research on racism marginalize you in the academy?

Francis: I have to answer yes and no to that question. I didn't really start working on racism until I had done a substantial amount of research and writing in Caribbean anthropology. By the time I got working on racism I was an established Caribbean specialist in social anthropology and had obtained tenure and promotion. I couldn't really be touched [i.e., threatened with dismissal or loss of job]. I was untouchable.

Now, that's on the official level, but informally there were all kinds of problems. I started my research on racism when I got to York University in 1971 and there I was asked to teach a course called "Ethnicity, Stratification and Pluralism." The person who used to teach it decided she didn't want to do it any more. I said no, I want to teach a course on race and racism. There was real negativism, I would say, even hostility towards teaching a course like that. The department was afraid of a course that had race and racism in its title; they said it would be too difficult to get it past the university's administrative machinery and have it approved. Then there were people in the department who didn't want a course on race and racism, and they argued that the study of racism was sociology not social anthropology. In a more traditional anthropology department, like at the University of Toronto, you might have had a course on the genetics of race.

At first I thought, the main thing is to get the course taught, let's worry about the labelling later. So, I taught it as "Ethnicity, Stratification and Pluralism" for two or three years. I would say to my students, look folks, this is a course on race and racism and here is the outline of the readings; if you don't want this, leave. A few people did leave but not a whole lot. Eventually I thought, let's fight the battle and [try to have it approved as a course on racism]. It created a fairly tense series of circumstances. The course was very successful in terms of enrolment so the department couldn't get rid of it. I was the only one in the whole bloody university at that time who was teaching racism. Gradually we added a few more courses throughout the university.

I think the issue at York was that racism was a very alien field. They had something like six or seven non-white professors in the whole faculty. There were about four people of African descent, a couple of South Asian descent, and that's about it. So, really it wasn't an issue [in the

1970s]. I was at Wilfred Laurier the other night, giving a lecture and people said to me: “Oh, York, is the centre for the study of anti-racism.” Right, it’s the centre today but when I started it was a desert. So, the university at least, has come a long way.

That was the beginning and one had to work slowly to get race and racism legitimized as a subject area. We then moved to the second stage of this process. [The university hired people with the same ethnicities as their subject matter.] The racialized people who have been hired at the university currently suffer from the same exclusivity and chilly environments that existed in the past. So, their presence has not really altered the underlying dynamic, which is still, I think, one of aversion for many people. So, right, the university has open hiring and they go all out of their way to hire and create a diverse environment and then what happens to the people once they’re in there? They still feel excluded. People from disadvantaged communities are at lower levels; there are not many in decision-making capacities at most institutions, yet. They are just not part of the dominant authority structure. We still have a long way to go for that to happen.

The older, white people who started the research and teaching on racism or the Caribbean got pushed out. That certainly happened to me. I was informally excluded. For example Black Studies, when it was first proposed at York University, didn’t include me because I’m not black. My work is on blacks; it didn’t matter. So, these kinds of exclusionary features were certainly evident at York while I was still there and they’re still very evident, right now, as we speak.

I see [such exclusions] as an inevitable stage in the evolution of social history; I’m not personally affronted by it because I understand it. But it does give you a feeling that no matter what you do you’re marginalized; you’re marginalized from the white authority structure at the beginning [because of your research] and then you’re marginalized by the racialized authority

structure later on [because of skin colour]. So it's been a no-win situation. But when you reach a certain point in your career it doesn't really matter, you just do what you have to or want to do.

Vijay: Did the Urban Alliance on Race Relations that sponsored some of your earlier work in the 1970s and 1980s, believe that you should have a black writing or researching partner?

Frances: The Urban Alliance on Race Relations was started in 1975 by a group of concerned citizens including the late Wilson Head [a black academic at York University who pioneered research on racism in Canada]. At that time, the Urban Alliance was structured in committee on education, justice, and so on. When the decision was made to do research, a committee was struck, and it reflected the membership of the Urban Alliance. On that committee, there was Dharma Lingam, a South Asian, Susan Ing, a Chinese, but the research specialists were people like me and Jeffrey Reitz [a white, male sociologist at the University of Toronto]. I brought in Effie Ginsburg, a white, female graduate student at York, who had statistical and analytic skills that I didn't have.

Vijay: In the 1970s and 1980s when you wrote your earlier reports on racism, there was no bias that only blacks had a special prerogative for writing on racism. How did the mainstream and the black community regard some of your earlier reports?

Frances: The first study I did was an attitude survey called the *Dynamics of Racism in Toronto* (1978) and it was received very poorly by mainstream society. This was the first indication that there was racism in Canada, and the response of the mainstream society to the reports was to deny, even in the face of research evidence. They said that [such allegations] were absurd, it was absolutely not true. I was even accused of making up the data and finagling the numbers. It was

just ridiculous. I was absolutely furious. I was really very angry and very hurt that people, or the journalists, would even think that I would be capable of falsifying data to make an ideological point. That was very distasteful. Such denials still happen today. In *Discourses of Domination* Carol Tator and I wrote that the principle assumption of the denials of racism is that it does not exist in a democratic society. “The assumption is that because Canada is a society that upholds the ideals of a liberal democracy, it cannot possibly be racist. The denial of racism is so habitual in the media that to even make the allegation of bias and discrimination and raise the possibility of its influence on social outcomes becomes a serious social infraction, incurring the wrath and ridicule of many journalists and editors” (2002, 229).

But, the black community, small as it was at that time, much smaller than today, reacted very favourably. They said what people still say today, you’re not telling us anything new, we know this, we’ve experienced it, but it takes white validation and serious research that hopefully will get people to pay attention to it. Validate the victim’s experience.

The one circumstance that hit us badly I think, Jeff, more than me, was when the study *Dynamics of Racism* in Toronto came out. When that research was reported in the newspapers, we were living in the Bathurst/Eglinton area in a very large beautiful house. We had a lovely dining room that had a large window facing our back garden and there was a laneway behind that. One day we were all sitting there when there was a gun or a rifle shot that hit our dining room window, it didn’t shatter the glass, it was clearly some kind of beebee gun. This incident happened directly after that report got attention in the newspapers. We’re almost positive that it was some racist or white supremacist or both out there in the laneway shooting at us.

I also received a lot of hate telephone calls and a lot of hate mail. That led to changing the telephone number and delisting it and subsequent to that I never give out my home telephone

number. Sometimes, at the university, I would have my telephone calls screened. I think the hate mail, which was always anonymous, came from the neo-Nazi, white supremacist, racist network, the very people that we are now charging at the Human Rights Commission.

In 1985 Effie Ginzberg and I published *Who Gets the Work?: A Test of Racial Discrimination in Employment* which provided documentary evidence of the allegations made by racialized people of the racism of employers. [The methodology of] *Who Gets the Work?* [which used actors to pose as job applicants] was seriously challenged. [It was argued] that potential employers were lied to since the individuals were not real job applicants. So it was entrapment, and therefore, quite unethical. Another line of attack was that if [racism in employment] was really true then the discriminating employers must be identified and charged at the Human Rights Commission. So we had to counteract by saying, no, this is research, it's not entrapment, we're not out to get these employers because they discriminated or to charge them with human rights violations. Both arguments come down to denial and an effort to undermine the results of our research. The denial of racism is still happening today, in certain public quarters, for example, the denial of racial profiling. [The public response is] that it can't happen, it doesn't happen. Carol and I have recently documented this in *Racial Profiling in Toronto: Discourses of Domination, Mediation, and Opposition* (2003).

Vijay: Did you personally encounter racism in the 1970s?

Frances: Worse than that, as an interracial couple Jeff and I were refused accommodation in a rental property in Burlington and Montreal. In Montreal, I had seen an apartment and wanted to rent it but the landlord didn't have the lease papers with him and he said: "No problem, I'll drop over later this evening." Good. He dropped over and he saw my son Terry, who was then two

years old, playing on the floor and suddenly he said, “Oh, no, no. You can’t rent this apartment, that’s totally out of the question” and walked out. There was no mechanism in Montreal that I could find, of charging this man. I don’t think there was a Quebec Human Rights Commission. It was not a criminal situation so there was nothing I could do about what happened. But these things have a way of working out for the best because we realized we could not keep on renting and we managed to get a down payment together to buy a house.

Vijay: So it’s experiences like these that made you interested in studying racism?

Frances: Oh yes, absolutely. I was always interested but being subjected to racial discrimination, directly in Canada, “the race-free society” [heightened the interest]. For example, we were in London, England last month, and I noticed there were an extraordinary number of interracial couples. Yet I began to notice that people were looking at us a lot and then I began to speculate why. It’s because of our age. Nobody raises an eyebrow seeing young people but [it seemed that people were curious] at seeing this elderly couple on buses and subways. Looking as curiosity is fairly harmless whereas, as you know, actual discrimination is much harder.

Vijay: In researching and thinking about the Other what have you learned about yourself, particularly, about being white?

Frances: Studies of whiteness are incredibly important for the theoretical understanding of race. The whiteness perspective has made a very, very important contribution to our understanding the interracial dynamic and the power relations that flow from it. It has led me to think of how I’ve perceived myself but I haven’t made much progress on that because I’m still searching. I’ve

only ever seen myself as white in relation to others who are not white. I have never really sat down and thought [about] what being white means to me personally other than it probably doesn't mean a hell of a lot or else I would not have lived my life the way I have. At some level it probably must have but I'm really not sure. I'm really not sure.

I have never felt conflicted about being white. I always felt that although I'm not a person of colour, still having had the Jewish experience, I know not only intellectually and professionally but also emotionally what victimization by race really means. I don't think I've ever had any real difficulties or suffered any guilt for being white probably again because of my German background.

Vijay: Did your research on racism and your interracial family make you marginal to the Jewish and the black community?

Frances: I have very little to do with the Jewish community, in fact, nothing at all. I'm not an observant Jew [Judaism]; I don't go to synagogue. I don't really like much about the traditional religion though I identify with it culturally and historically. I have no contact with any Jewish community group. The only exception is the League for Human Rights of B'nai Brith because they're involved in anti-racism and its past director, Karen Mock, is a professional and a personal friend. But there's no real tie or attachment.

The only constraint is my being American. It's not a difficulty but if tensions ever arise, they have nothing to do with being Jewish it's mainly with being American. In my family we are all basically anti-American, including me. Nevertheless the United States is the country that afforded me refuge and without that I'd have been dead. So I have a very strong emotional attachment to the United States and to being American because that's the nation that rescued me.

But I have deep distaste for its politics, its domestic and foreign policy, and its choice of leaders. There's very little I like about the U.S. but I have that emotional commitment to it nevertheless. Nobody else in my family or the people that I am friendly with share that, so that sets me apart more than anything else.

The black community is made up of many different cultures and groups and the people have come from various parts of the world for example Africa, [the] Caribbean, United States, and Britain. The older members of the Caribbean community that I know, were always supportive of my research. The younger members...who don't know me, probably have no feelings one way or the other. The black intellectuals in this community have largely negative feelings about my research based upon race ownership.

Vijay: What do you mean by race ownership?

Frances: Well, they feel that regardless of my past and regardless of my affiliations I have no business writing about their stuff.

Vijay: Perhaps there is a fear of appropriation?

Frances: Yeah, that's been very evident. There are exceptions but generally speaking that's pretty much the feeling. So, in that sense, I've been marginal to the black intellectual community.

Vijay: As a Jewish woman growing up in New York you experienced discrimination, does that make you feel an insider to the black experience?

Frances: Sure. I've profited from [that experience] because I understand that the effects of discrimination, no matter who you are, are basically the same. So from that sense, I've always been attuned to racism, as I am towards anybody who's a victim of discrimination.

Vijay: But blacks don't consider that important?

Frances: No, not really. There's considerable antipathy among black intellectuals toward Jews and Judaism that has a long history in the United States. In contemporary times, it is expressed in the Israel and Palestine situation, so the relationship that used to exist, in the United States, between progressive Jews and progressive blacks in the Civil Rights movement is long gone. [Many] black intellectuals are very anti-Semitic at this point for all kinds of historical reasons. Black intellectuals identify me as a Jew, as well as a white woman, that probably makes it worse at this point in time rather than better.

Vijay: So in essence, despite the fact that you have experienced racism, it comes down to the colour of your skin.

Frances: Oh, pretty well. Sure. My research doesn't matter to the way I am perceived by certain groups.

Vijay: Does the social construction theory hold up for you, or do you think it is essentialism?

Frances: The social construction theory does hold up, if you look at it from the point of view of who's doing the constructing. If the communities of colour, or the blacks, are doing the constructing of white people based upon the whiteness of their skin, it's still about theory; you just have to turn it around. It is still whiteness, yes, but it's their construction of whiteness, in

this instance. And their construction of whiteness does not allow for individual differences or individual variations. So in that way it's essentialism.

Vijay: It's essentialism because as a white person you are assumed to have certain characteristics, even if you have a lifetime of work to prove otherwise.

Frances: Right, exactly. A contemporary parallel is the English woman, Margaret Hassan in Iraq. She was born an English woman, married to an Iraqi and had been working on Iraqi causes for what, thirty-five years in Iraq? She was nevertheless murdered by insurgents in 2004.

Vijay: For being white and British?

Frances: Yes. It's a bind isn't it? Well it's the same thing that racism is based on—you are never perceived as an individual in your own right; rather you are representing something larger—the white race or the white community or white privilege. When racialized people are not seen as individuals [we refer to it as racism.] It's the same for white intellectuals who are trying to help or at least have an understanding of the issues and problems. Nevertheless they are tarred with the same brush, the way [whites] have always tarred people of colour.

Such stereotyping has never mattered to me personally because I understand the dynamics, what's behind it, what it means. It's part of the whole victimization process. So I guess I'm not too upset.

Vijay: There seems to be a permanent colour line and perhaps your work and personal life should have given a different message to the people.

Frances: But it didn't and it doesn't, in fact. Well, that's one of the things we have to suffer. But there is another side of this coin. One of the major hallmarks of an academic is that you train and teach future generations. I have received enormous recognition from students, not only in terms of having taught the right kind of approach but their eventual placement in universities. Now that's tremendous reward. It's enormously gratifying to know that you touched somebody at age twenty-five who is now fifty and a senior professor, or a senior lawyer or a judge somewhere. It's a continuing contribution to have helped to frame and shape minds. You feel you have made a difference.

Vijay: Describe an incident when you felt that black activists in Canada accepted you as an ally.

Frances: I don't think that there has been any such incident.

Vijay: Really! Never?

Frances: No, that has never happened.

Vijay: What about the Canadian Foundation on Race Relations?

Frances: No, I have never been nominated to its board. Carol Tator and I went to some of their early meetings. I am one of their founding members but we were never asked to be part of its management. We have received small grants from them, for example, they funded the racial profiling study. Similarly, a politician would not get any brownie points for nominating me to a board of an association such as the Canadian Foundation on Race Relations. They have got to nominate a black person. In the early 1990s when the NDP party formed the government in Ontario, Carol and I never got any recognition in terms of appointments. No recognition

whatsoever despite the fact that anti-racism was very, very strong on their agenda. The government needed to get the electoral support of the racialized communities so all their appointments were members of those communities. If you're a politician you want policy advisors and people who are in the know, then you appoint people from that community, not people who are attached to it or because they study white racism against it. That doesn't earn you any political advantage.

Vijay: Can you describe an incident in which you were accused of appropriating the black experience for your professional advancement?

Frances: I can't think of a single incident as such, but I'm sure it's happened. I'm almost positive it's happened but I can't pinpoint any particular incident.

Vijay: Can you pinpoint your feelings at the time when you felt that accusation explicitly or implicitly (otherwise).

Frances: I don't think I can even do that, not really. I guess it's because a long time ago I developed "I don't give a shit" attitude. I do what I want.

Vijay: Sometimes racialized people are accused of using the "race card" to promote their careers. What are your views about that?

Frances: In a way, we have all done that because we all use whatever it is we study to promote our careers. We use everything that [helps] us to raise our profile or give us mobility. So what is the difference between using your status as a person of colour in a basically white society or a specialist in some area of study? What is wrong in using your personal position to advance

yourself when that also happens to be your area of scholarship? I know people who use the race card are looked down upon for taking advantage of political correctness and so on. But basically, why not, when it is not only who you are, but it is also your field of study?

Vijay: The other side of the coin is that white people have always used the race card.

Frances: Of course, but they've used it so unconsciously that they're not even aware of it. The white establishment that has run all these [institutions] has always done it. It's just that they haven't been recognized for what it is—white power and white privilege.

Vijay: You have extensive experience at being an expert witness. How does being white and having academic expertise on racism play out in the courtroom?

Frances: I have been an expert witness [many times] in the justice system and in the human rights arena, but not always successfully. In the past there have been judges who would not allow me to testify on racism because they thought that such testimony would not be helpful to the courts and it was irrelevant to the case at hand. That has happened a number of times. The same thing has happened in the human rights area where the decisions of the tribunal were that the work I do is prejudiced and I come in with a biased perspective. In other words, if the issue in question is race, I say, yes racism exists and therefore my testimony and writings are [viewed as] biased.

That happened in August of this year [2004]. A tribunal for the Canadian Human Rights Commission [dealing] with a case of employment discrimination wrote explaining their decision. They said that first of all they disallowed my report and therefore disallowed my appearance as an expert witness on the grounds that I essentially begin with the bias that racism exists and

therefore, it exists in this case. The second reason [for disallowing my testimony] was that I do not provide the normal evidentiary baseline, that is statistics and numbers and I deal with issues that cannot be proven or tested such as a chilly environment or an atmosphere where whiteness prevails. They argued that my report [would not have been] useful to them. But [the frustration is that] racism is not subject to statistics and to testing.

[Such incidences] have happened many times. The decisions regarding my work [or that of others] as biased or prejudiced stem from the lack of understanding that social science cannot be objective; it is not the same as manipulating chemicals in a chemistry lab. If social scientists do not produce numbers then [some assume it comes down to] personal opinion, and, they argue, who says your opinion is any more useful than that of anybody else? Anybody who says racism is pervasive in Canadian society is automatically assumed to be a biased individual. Such attitudes are still very prevalent in both systems. This is not a matter of disrespect for my expertise but has much to do with the denial of racism. Such views are not directed against me personally but against the theoretical and ideological doctrine of racism.

However, many times I have been accepted as an expert witness. A lot of judges have been accepting and have listened carefully and attentively, asked questions, used my appearance for educating themselves, and have shown empathy and sympathy for the aggrieved victims of racism. There have been many positive examples in the human rights tribunals. The point I'm making is that, even within those systems, there are people in high positions who subscribe to the denial of racism mechanism and [that attitude] affects how they deal with someone like me.

Vijay: Do you find judges more accepting now than they were ten years ago?

Frances: Absolutely, there is no question about that. It has changed because of the sensibility of some members of the system to the changing social reality around them. However, not everyone is sensitive to change so the old attitude and behaviour prevail as well. There are judges that still maintain that race, ethnicity, and culture are not relevant. Some lawyers and judges believe that all blacks are criminally prone. They think, just put them into the right situation, tempt them, and you know they'll be criminals because it's within them. In the *Colour of Democracy* [2000] Carol Tator and I document the case of Antonio Lamar, of the Supreme Court of Canada, and his public expression of racist views for which he subsequently apologized. But then people in the justice system see the bottom of the barrel. A judge [may not] have the opportunity to meet black people as neighbours, at the local church, or at his golf club. The only one he sees are those that have been charged with criminal activity, rightly or wrongly. Judges, like police officers, see the underbelly all the time.

Vijay: Do you feel guilty for being white and enjoying the privilege of skin colour? How do you reconcile with this given that your spouse is black and your children are mixed race? You have some privileges that your family is inherently denied.

Frances: This affects us, but it doesn't affect us in Canada, not in any overt way. It affects us a lot in Trinidad, where we've been for many years and now live part time every year. Trinidad has a colonial history and there is a fair-sized white elite made of old-time families and expatriates. The main determinant of class in the Caribbean is skin colour and related racial features; there is a gradation from white to near white, to brown, and finally to the black-skinned lower class. Like any colonized society, there is enormous white privilege. For example, when you go through bureaucratic procedures like buying a house, a car, getting a driver's license, or

purchasing a ticket on the ferry, whatever relates you to authority, all white people [have an] advantage. They are privileged in the most obvious ways, like queue jumping. I can go right to the head of the line, get the tickets and leave, now, how does that make me feel and how does it make Jeff feel? Over the years, we have come to agree that if it prevents Jeff from being humiliated and abused by some two-bit functionary, why not? I think it's a cold-hearted practicality of dealing with the logistics of living in a tough world and particularly trying to make things easier as you get older and less able to manage. Besides, I feel we have paid our dues to society.

In terms of my own inner feelings about it, I'm not even sure that being Jewish has made that difference. I feel very bad for my daughter Miriam and my son, Terry because they experience racism. Physically [i.e., in terms of skin colour] Miriam and Terry are exactly in the middle of their mother and father. Of course, it also depends on who is doing the looking; my children are perceived as light-skinned blacks and they both emphasize it. Terry, for twelve or more years, has worn dread locks down to his rear, so he announces his identity very, very powerfully. Miriam does that to a lesser extent but she too plays up her curly hair.

Miriam has not had too many instances of racism although she's had some. Terry has had a lot. We know about it, we talk about it, and we deal with it. It saddens me that he has had to go through these experiences. Both of our children are very strong individuals; we deliberately trained them that way knowing that they would have to go through these experiences. So they're not damaged by the racism they have encountered, they've been strengthened by some of these struggles and they understand them for what they are and so neither one of them has been made to feel inferior. But now and again I feel sad that they have

had to go through these humiliating experiences, as every person of colour has had to. But, I really don't feel guilty; I don't know if I should but I really don't.

It is interesting in how the family network has turned out. My granddaughter is thirteen. She is Terry's daughter, her mother is white and my granddaughter is one of these genetic happenings, she's phenotypically white. You would never suspect that she has any black in her unless you knew the family history. She's very fair, she has much lighter skin than I have, but there is a slight pigmentation that you see in summer time. But you have to look closely. She has brown, auburnish, straight, but wavy hair.

My granddaughter has completely identified with her black father, because her mother is not in the picture and he is the primary caregiver. So the bond is totally with the black father, Jeff, and me. She feels that she is too white, she hates herself for being too white and she wants to have a brown complexion like her father. She sits out in the sun to get darker. She is trying rather desperately to identify with the black parent. For years we've tried to tell her that what's inside is what's important. She's conflicted, a black father, a black grandfather and a white grandmother, where does she fit into this?

Vijay: What are the particular dilemmas of a white woman raising children of mixed race?

Frances: The main problem is that I had to explain the circumstances of life to very young children in trying to prepare them as they moved forward in life. It is hard; you can only do it incrementally as they grow older. I'm not sure I was always successful at it, neither was my husband, I think because it is really difficult to get across to children that they are as good as everybody else and race makes no difference. Miriam was much more sensitive to racism than Terry. It was difficult to prepare them for the fact that they were going to be humiliated for no

reason, for not having done anything. In grade eight Miriam had a major racist incident and we had to put her in a private school. Trying to explain the dynamics of racism to her, which we did and she accepted, was deeply, deeply hurtful. To see your child in pain because she'd been called a black bitch is really quite awful. It was difficult to deal with her pain. Dealing with that kind of hurt was hurtful to us.

Vijay: Do you advocate or support black and white intimate relations in Canada?

Frances: I have often been criticized for my views on interracial marriages. At York University I used to teach courses on Caribbean anthropology and the Caribbean Diaspora. These classes were almost always I'd say 75%, filled with white women. Why were they in that class? It was almost invariably because they had black Caribbean boyfriends. As the term would progress, they would come to me and spill out their guts; what are they going to do? Should they marry or partner with this man? The advice I always gave is: have a ball, have a great time, enjoy, but do not marry and do not get into a permanent relationship. But why, they would ask, you did it?

I would try to go through and tell them that it is not the racial but the cultural difference that makes such relationships difficult. As [young white Canadian women], they didn't know anything about Caribbean male/female relations and cultural norms. But the boyfriend does and the chances are that unless [these women] had enormous sensitivity or knew a great deal about his background more than taking a course in Caribbean anthropology, they're not going to like it. So they'd walk out of my office very dejected because they'd come to see me with the expectation that well, I'm the role model who has done it so why shouldn't they and I'd given them just the opposite advice. I really believe the problem is intercultural. If you're interracially related, after a while, in terms of a good relationship, that's totally meaningless. But the cultural

upbringings of two people who come from different areas of the world never go away and that's where the problems emerge. But try to tell that to young people in love.

In the Caribbean, gender relations are still very problematic; men are very patriarchal, for the most part. Despite the professionalism among women in recent times, women are still basically seen in very traditional roles. They're not expected to be assertive in any way. Then there is a deep-seated belief in, for want of a better word, male promiscuity. Men can have several relations but women are not allowed to; they do but normatively they're not allowed to. It's not only true in the Caribbean but elsewhere as well, but it is very predominant and powerful there. That's not to say that men don't do it here [are not promiscuous here], of course they do, but in the Caribbean it's almost an expectation. You're not a man unless you're doing it everywhere. So, I think that can be problematic. So I think unless the white woman knows her partner extremely well, there are always individual circumstances, but as a general pattern I think it is very difficult.

Vijay: So even if the society makes it easier to rent an apartment or they don't get stared at quite as much, you still do not support intercultural marriages?

Frances: I think so. Marriage is a difficult relationship and then you add differences of upbringing, socialization, and cultural norms. You're adding to the tensions that are already there almost by definition. The rate of failure in intercultural relationships or formal marriages is relatively high. It's more than just societal perceptions. Jeff and I have had to work out all kinds of cultural differences that have nothing to do with race or religion but simply with cultural outlook.

Vijay: How have you survived? It must be very emotionally tense?

Frances: No it wasn't, it really isn't. It is tough to work in the human rights field. Academics and activists who are involved in this field, in general, have an unshakeable faith in the equality of all human beings. There are very few universals but that is certainly one of them. Such a belief is not a doctrine. It's more than that; it becomes your essence. Frontline workers who put their lives on the line in the pursuit of equality certainly have it. I have that to a certain extent. I think that's a characteristic you must have to work on anti-racism. You have to be able to withstand the challenge to your belief in equality from kooks, racists, ignorant, and ill-informed people and say to yourself that their views don't count. You must have the strength to write off some people.

One has to build personal strength and confidence if you are in an academic area in which you are likely to be the subject of criticism. It is particularly true in the sensitive interpersonal, interracial, and intercultural matters.

The only way this work on anti-racism has been in the slightest bit painful is the fact that I have never got a single award from any racialized community that I have advocated for—particularly the black community. I've been invited many times to give talks and I've been treated very well, but in terms of [being given] an award—a certificate or a trophy—not once. Not even by the Urban Alliance on Race Relations of which I was a founding member and under whose support I did some of my major research. An award is public recognition that disadvantaged people always use as a symbol of an individual's contribution or work. If you read the black community papers, they are constantly giving awards for this, that, and the other thing. The fact that I've never been a recipient of any awards, you know, I notice its absence. The black community cannot take that public step of identifying a white pioneer in the struggle. I

am never going to be identified for an award, no matter what my allegiance to the black community and my interracial family. But then I know not to expect it, so it's all right.

Vijay: Has there been change in Canadian society?

Frances: Change has taken place over the course of my professional life. There has been improvement at certain levels of analysis. If you look carefully at certain institutions and some societal dynamics there has been a change, for example, in the justice system. In the last ten years some important decisions have been made that favour the racial equality cause. More of such decisions are coming out all the time. They don't make many waves but they are instrumental because they help to build up case law on these issues and it moves us to creating a more equitable justice system in Canada.

Similarly there has been some significant movement in the human rights field, although it is also heavily bureaucratized. There are many minor human rights cases that have succeeded. In the race field there is the class action led by National Capital Alliance on Racism (NCAR), an Ottawa group, which found that Health Canada was discriminatory towards South Asian scientists in their employ. That is really a landmark decision because it's not a small private employer, rather the government of Canada. There are many similar decisions at the provincial level. Those are signs of some change but there are also institutions, like the police, that steadfastly maintain they're not racist. It's just, you know, the few rotten apples.

Generally there is a much greater awareness and acceptance that racism exists. Things are changing, albeit slowly. The struggle is endless.

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