“Do-gooder White Feminism’s Flaws: The Challenges of White Feminists Training Low-income Aboriginal Women”

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I. Introduction

For three years I followed a group of low-income women, the majority of whom were Native, as they left welfare and participated in an innovative retraining program to become apprenticing carpenters in Regina, Saskatchewan. [1] In many ways, the program was seen as an incredible success. Three of the women who began the program as welfare recipients are now home owners. Three of the women achieved their Level 4 in carpentry – including one who is believed to be the first Aboriginal woman in Canada to do so. [2] And yet, the overt and subtle racism that was embedded in the White feminist ideology and everyday practices of this retraining program has yet to be fully named or explored.

II. Methodology and Theoretical Context

Methodologically, my assessment of this retraining program for low-income women is informed by my previous research on women, poverty and retraining along with qualitative interviews with most of the people involved in this particular program. Over three years I travelled four times to Regina and met with the organizers, participants, government administrators, and funders of the program. For the most part I stayed at the homes of the two coordinators. I saw how important it was to them to make this program work and how they both sacrificed their health and time with family and friends in order to give every ounce of themselves to this endeavour. But above all, I spent the majority of my time with the women participants. I met their children, partners and friends. They told me about their heartaches and their small triumphs. I interviewed them at their worksites and in their homes. In order to make this as comfortable for the participants as possible, I used an open-ended interview style, focusing on one particular theme with each visit. In most cases the interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed. The participants read the previous transcript and edited it before proceeding to the next interview. They signed research agreements at every stage of the interview process and were assured that they could use either their name or a pseudonym. They were also guaranteed that I would not use any portion of the interview without their written consent.

Theoretically, my assessment is informed by critical race theory (with particular attention to colonialism and "active colonialism"), moral regulation theory and the history of the first and second wave of the Canadian women's movement. Each of these will be explored in turn to properly develop the theoretical lens to critique this retraining program.

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[1] Please note I generally refer to status and mixed-race women as "Native" because that is the term they themselves most commonly used. I use "Aboriginal" occasionally to avoid constant repetition. When appropriate I specify "status" or "Métis" to differentiate between these two groups.

[2] For a more detailed exploration of this unique retraining program see: Margaret Hillyard Little, *If I Had a Hammer: Retraining that really works*, University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver, 2005.

It is impossible to over-state the important role that racism played in the daily life of this retraining program. The program, its instructors and participants, were a product of a profoundly racist society that has a bloody, murderous history in regards to the treatment of Aboriginal peoples. And this colonization is not a thing of the past, preserved in museums and textbooks. Rather, there is *active* colonization occurring right now. [3] And because of the higher proportions of Natives in Canada's West this colonization is particularly visible in Regina.

In many ways, Regina is the heart beat of White-Native relations in Canada. Regina has the highest Native population of all Canadian cities with Natives representing eight per cent of the 200,000 Reginites. Its Native population is also the youngest in all of Canada with 40 per cent of the Native population 15 years old or younger. [4] Even the name of the city speaks to White-Native issues. The Cree name Oskuna-Kasus-Teki or "Pile of Bones" was changed to Regina, after the Queen of England, to more firmly solidify the Anglo-Saxon culture. [5]

Regina is the site of a coercive colonial project that has a long, bloody history that continues to play itself out on the city's streets. By the second half of the 19th century the Canadian government confined the majority of Native peoples to reserves, which established Regina as a primarily White city surrounded by reserves. This demarcation of racialized space was never secure and often required intense policing to shore up the borders. In the 1950s Native peoples were forbidden from living, or even passing through Western Canadian cities such as Regina without a "pass." The federal government had reduced its housing funding on reserves and Native men and women migrated to Western Canadian cities looking for shelter and jobs. The Whites were disturbed by this trend and the federal government established a "pass" system that made it illegal for Native peoples to leave the reserve without obtaining a pass from the (White) Indian agent or agricultural agent. Native women were particularly suspect and assumed to be prostitutes if they were found in the cities. These government policies were indeed apartheid policies that separated Whites from Natives and guaranteed Whites "safety" from the Native population. This also helped to turn the urban space into a violently racist space where Whites could feel free to abuse and assault Natives who were found treading on sacred White urban space. [6]

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[3] My thanks to Bonita Lawrence for discussions about active colonialism in everyday life.

[4] Del Abaquod and Vikas Khaladkar, "Case Study: The First Nations Economy in the City of Regina," in For Seven Generations: An Information Legacy of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Research Studies Database, Ottawa, Libraxus, 1997, p. 6 cited in Sherene Razack, "Gendered Racial Violence and Spatialized Justice: The Murder of Pamela George," S. Razack, ed., Race, Space, and the Law: Unmapping a White Settler Society, Between the Lines, Toronto, 2002, fn #12, p. 130.

[5] In fact, it was Princess Louise, wife of the Governor General of Canada and daughter of the Queen of England, who proposed to rename the settlement "Regina" meaning Queen. W.A. Riddell, Regina: From Pile o' Bones to Queen City of the Plains, Windsor Publications, Regina, Sask., 1981, pp. 9 and 20.

Today this urban space remains marked by this colonial heritage. A mere drive through the city today will reveal quite starkly that this is a city of divisions – that the majority of the Native urban population live in the industrial and downtown core of the city and the middle class Whites generally live in the various tree-lined suburbs. [7] Native peoples who come to the city today looking for work and housing often find themselves limited to reside and socialize in the downtown. "The Stroll", located in the heart of the downtown core, is a Native zone where Native women sell their bodies and Native street people beg for food. It is a place where White women tend to avoid and White men come to buy sexual favours. It is a place where violence is routine – where White men have come, taunted, raped and even murdered Native women, such as in the infamous murder of Pamela George, a Native prostitute who was killed by White middle-class teenage boys from the suburbs on Easter weekend, 1995. [8]

Despite the dangerous, brutal nature of the city, Native peoples continue to flock to Regina. Once in the city they are left in a "jurisdictional limbo" between the city and the reserve. One study of Regina's Native peoples found that urban Natives are more marginalized than reserve Natives because they do not have access to social services and support networks that the latter do. The consequences are devastating for Native men and women in Regina. Only 2.8 per cent of Regina's workforce is Native. Aboriginal poverty in Regina is higher than the national average with 91 per cent of Native households living in poverty. [9] Native people are over-policed and are incarcerated at one of the highest rates in the world. Their suicide rate is also one of the highest in the world and four times higher than the non-Aboriginal population. [10]

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[6] Sarah Carter, "Categories and Terrains of Exclusion: Constructing the 'Indian Woman' in the Early Settlement Era in Western Canada," Joy Parr and Mark Rosenfeld, eds., Gender and History in Canada, 1996, pp. 30-49, esp. pp. 40-41.

[7] Today the racial divisions of the city are not quite as stark as they have been in the recent past. Now a small but emerging Aboriginal middle class do live in some of the suburbs and a certain White middle class with a propensity for social justice work have moved back to live in the downtown. But to date this remains, in both cases, a small group of citizens.

[8] For a compelling analysis of this tragic event see: Sherene Razack, "Gendered Racial Violence and Spatialized Justice: The Murder of Pamela George," S. Razack, ed., Race, Space, and the Law: Unmapping a White Settler Society, Between the Lines, Toronto, 2002, pp. 121-156.

[9] Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples: Looking Forward, Looking Back, Vol. 4, "Perspectives and Realities," Supply and Services Canada, Ottawa, 1996, p. 518 cited in S. Razack, "Gendered Racial Violence," fn# 26, p. 133.

[10] "Choosing Life: Special Report on Suicide Among Aboriginal People," Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1995, p. x, Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Supply and Services Canada, Ottawa, 1996, Vol. 3, Chapter 3, Section 1.3.

This intense everyday colonizing is distinctly gendered. Native women face enormous discrimination and poverty. They represent the majority (58 per cent) of Native migrants to Regina. While 60 per cent of urban Native households live below the poverty line, 80 to 90 per cent of Native single mothers are impoverished. [11] Recently, Native women are being incarcerated at an even higher rate than Native men are. In Pinegrove, a correctional facility in Regina, 80 to 90 per cent of the inmates are Native women. Native women's admission to correctional centres in Saskatchewan has increased by 111 per cent from 1976 to 1992. [12]

Native women have a distinct place in Canada's colonial history. They were initially considered helpful to the White settler and there were many common-law arrangements between White men and Native women. As settlements prospered and White women immigrated to the West, Native women's role was devalued. This is when negative images of Native women as the dirty and immoral "squaw" became prominent. This negative stereotype helped justify confining Native women to the reserve, harassing, assaulting and even murdering the women who came to the city. As Pamela George's murder makes abundantly clear Native women are never safe in the city of Regina. Harassment and discrimination is a part of the air they breathe.

This active colonization that low-income Aboriginal women encounter also has moral overtones. I have previously argued that moral concerns are deeply embedded in the regulation of welfare recipients. [13] Moral regulation scholars such as Philip Corrigan, Derek Sayer and Bruce Curtis have explored how the state is involved in the moral regulation of its citizens. They examine the processes by which the state organizes social life and the relationships that develop between the rules, the ruled, and the procedures that ensure this relationship. They observe how these state practices become a project of normalizing or rendering natural certain behaviours, family forms, and sexual practices while marginalizing others. And they perceive the state's involvement in this moral regulation as ongoing, not merely imposing a dominant ideology as a *fait accompli* but continuously regulating the formation of identities and subjectivities of citizens. [14] Mariana Valverde and Lorna Weir have argued that it is not merely the state, but a host of social organizations that also play important roles in the moral regulation of people. [15] And most useful for this case study, Sarita Srivastava has demonstrated how feminists from the second wave women's movement also are involved in the moral regulation of the women they are helping or rescuing. [16] Highlighting the moral undertones of White feminist work is useful in assessing this retraining program.

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[11] Jim Harding, "Presentation to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples," p. 323 cited in S. Razack, "Gendered Racial Violence," fn #30, p. 134.

[12] "Bridging the Cultural Divide: A Report on Aboriginal People and Criminal Justice in Canada," Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, p. 31-32 cited in S. Razack, "Gendered Racial Violence," fn#30, p. 134.

[13] Margaret Hillyard Little, *No Car, No Radio, No Liquor Permit: The Moral Regulation of Single Mothers in Ontario, 1920-1997*, Oxford University Press, Toronto, 1998.

[14] Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1985; Bruce Curtis, *Building the Educational State: Canada West, 1836-1871*, Althouse Press, London, 1988.

[15] Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925*, McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, 1991; Mariana Valverde and

Ninetheenth century and early 20th century maternal feminists carved out a moral agenda as they conducted their social reform work. As lobbyists for social policy and early social reform administrators these White bourgeois women asserted their class, race and gender position while helping or rescuing others. Valverde and my own work explores how these first wave feminists established their moral and racial purity through their social reform work. [17] By rescuing or studying immigrant, poor and working-class women and children these White bourgeois women emphasized their own supposed benevolence, superiority and innocence. Their position as moral guardians of the nation, particularly the nation's marginalized, helped to solidify their own race, class and gender position.

This history of the first wave women's movement has influenced the nature of the second wave. White feminists from the 1960s to the present have been able to assert a similar role as the moral leader, reformer and expert of those they are helping. But unlike the first wave, the second wave feminists have also adopted the project of changing the very nature of society from within their own organizations. Whereas first wave feminists focused on improving conditions "out there" second wave feminists have looked inward, with the desire to change their own feminist community and ultimately, themselves. As Srivastava argues, "Using implicit guidelines for conduct as well as alternative moral standards, language, and practices, social movements such as [second wave] feminism work at constructing imagined egalitarian communities and ethical selves…" [18] It is this creation of a feminist ethical society that becomes most troubling. Those involved in creating this feminist movement set themselves up as morally superior while they rescue others. It is this moral superiority along with their conscious or unconscious participation in active colonialism that helps explain the nature of the everyday operations of this particular retraining program.

It is the second wave feminists' claims of moral superiority complete with colonial, racist and elitist interests that helps to explain why Aboriginal women have been reluctant to call themselves feminists or to join this movement. There are several reasons why some Aboriginal scholars and activists have refused the feminist label. Some assert that gender relations play out quite differently in

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Lorna Weir, "The Struggles of the Immoral: Preliminary Remarks on Moral Regulation," *Resources for Feminist Research* 17, no. 3 (September 1988): 31-4.

[16] Sarita Srivastava, "'You're Calling Me a Racist': The Moral and Emotional Regulation of Antiracism and Feminism," *SIGNS: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 31, No. 1 (Autumn 2005): 29-62; S. Srivastava, "Tears, Fears and Careers: Anti-racism and Emotion in Social Movement Organizations," *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 31, no.1 (2006): 55-90.

[17] M. Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap and Water*, Chapter 1, and M. Little, *No Car, No Radio, No Liquor Permit*, Chapter 1.

[18] S. Srivastava, "You're Calling Me a Racist," p. 34.

Aboriginal and Euro-western cultures. Some believe this is particularly the case when it comes to valorizing motherhood. Others argue that "equality" is a colonial concept that is not relevant to Aboriginal women in Aboriginal cultures. Instead of focusing on the White feminist project of gender equality many Aboriginal scholars and activists want to focus on colonization, racism and economic disparity. These differences in culture and politics have not been fully appreciated by the White-dominated feminist movement. Aboriginal scholars and activists have been blatantly ignored, patronized, and discriminated against by White feminists when they have made these alliances. Simultaneously Aboriginal scholars and activists have been called traitors of their own communities for speaking out gender inequality. [19] This has made for very difficult alliances between the White-dominated feminist movement and Aboriginal women.

This theoretical context which appreciates critical race theory (particularly colonial history and active colonialism today); moral regulation and the history of the first and second wave of the feminist movement is critical to understanding the overt and subtle racism that embodied much of this retraining program. In many ways, the everyday practices of this retraining program were illustrative of a much larger clash between Aboriginal women and White feminists.

III. Overt Racism

Given the epidemic nature of racism in Canadian society generally and Regina specifically it is hardly surprising that Native women experienced discrimination within this retraining program. In particular, there are two forms of racism that occurred regularly in this retraining program. They are overt racism marked by exclusion in its many manifestations and subtle racism which includes tokenism and exoticization of Aboriginal culture, ignorance of cultural differences, and the assumption that White ways of knowing and being in the world are the norm and even superior. Many of these incidents of discrimination appear minor when isolated on their own. And most of these forms of discrimination occur regularly in our own workplaces. Their common occurrence does not minimize their significance. As anti-racist scholars argue, the cumulative effect of facing this overt and subtle discrimination day after day deeply affects a person's ability to work with and trust those from the dominant race. And if this were not enough, these women in the retraining program must close the doors of the shop at the end of the day only to return to a city steeped in a bloodied colonial heritage.

Aboriginal women in this retraining program experienced a variety of forms of overt racism. Exclusion was one form of everyday racist practice within the retraining program. Native participants believed the co-ordinators excluded them from the preferential jobs. One Native woman said, "There's racists here. And the White women – they get the better jobs than the Natives. That's for sure." [20]

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[19] For a more detailed discussion of why Aboriginal scholars are reluctant to call themselves feminists see the work of M. E. Turpel, "Patriarchy and Paternalism: The Legacy of the Canadian State for First Nations Women," *Çanadian Journal of Women and the Law*, Vol. 6, 1993; Patricia Monture-Angus, *Thunder in My Soul: A Mohawk Woman Speaks,* Fernwood, Halifax, 1995; Verna St. Denis, "Feminism is for Everybody: Aboriginal Women, Feminism and Diversity," and Joyce Green, "Taking Account of Aboriginal Feminism," in Joyce Green, ed., *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*, Fernwood, Halifax, 2007.

Seniority compounded the issue of exclusion. In the first intake group, the women that remained in the program were all White except one who was Métis. In the second and third intake groups, the women who remained were mainly Native. Because of seniority, the White women in the first group had better wages and jobs that were more responsible. They were the ones who were selected as forewomen at job sites. It is Pat, the Métis woman from the first intake group, who pointed out this problem to me. "I think Denise needs to stand back and look at this issue. She probably doesn't mean it to look this way but it's how it looks from the outside. But I don't think that was her intention." [21] In this instance, Pat is aware of the subtly of racism - that regulations, such as seniority, which were not motivated by racist assumptions can have racist implications.

There is a spatial dimension to this exclusion as well. It was very apparent to me during my initial interviews with the women that the White women and the Native women inhabited different space within the program. The Native women tended to congregate outside of the shop building where they shared cigarettes as they joked with one another. The White women tended to go inside the shop and upstairs to the office where Denise, the coordinator usually could be found. Consequently, the White women had more informal chats with Denise and tended to feel more at ease with her than the Native women. Also, the White women, by virtue of spending time in the office, were more aware of what decisions were being made and what jobs were coming up. While there was no policy about who could and who could not spend time in the office it was clearly established early on in the program that this was a White space. The Native women were very aware of this spatial difference. In fact, one Native woman who was known for being very silent in the program spoke passionately about this issue: "That bugs me that they're [the White women are] upstairs and we're [the Native women] down here. And Denise tells them everything upstairs and we don't know anything down here." [22]

This spatial issue intensified when certain women were given keys to the shop. The rule was that all women who owned vehicles were given keys because they were often chauffeuring women to and from the shop. Because White women tended to have more economic resources and more familial supports than the Native women did, it happened that only White women had vehicles that regularly came to the shop. As a result, only White women had keys to the shop. Many Native women complained about this issue and considered it a racist rule. [23] After weeks of Native women feeling excluded I raised this issue with the co-ordinators. They were surprised to realize that their key rule had racist implications and immediately created a rule that all Co-op Board of Directors should have a key that established a key to the shop for one Métis woman. This incident exemplifies how easily unintended exclusions can build on a powerful colonial history of segregation and exclusion to create a racially charged environment. The fact that the co-ordinators did not notice the exclusion and that the Native women did not address this with the co-ordinators also provides insight into the nature of everyday racism within the program.

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[20] Interview with Anonymous Participant #14, October 1998.

[21] Interview with Pat, July 1999.

[22] Interview with Anonymous Participant #15, October 1998.

[23] Interview with Anonymous Participant #16, October 1998.

Blatant racist comments and accusations also led to Aboriginal women in the program feeling excluded or not fully welcomed. Customers on a number of occasions displayed racist attitudes. There were two instances where Native women were accused of stealing while on the worksite. In one case, a White couple had asked the retraining program to build them a fence around their yard in a very White suburb of Regina. The crew for the job was all Native women. A watch went missing and it was assumed that one of the Native women had stolen it. In the end, the watch was discovered under a towel in the bathroom. [24] It was the quick assumption that anything misplaced had been stolen by one of the Native women that speaks to the long colonial history of the place. On another job site the participants found a sign posted when they returned from lunch that read, "Get out squaw." This graffiti hails the powerful colonial history that granted urban space to Whites and confined Aboriginal space to reserves organized and policed by Whites. Denise, one of the co-ordinators, was shocked by this incident. "The Native women shrugged their shoulders and said they have experiences like this all the time and said it was normal! In the mean time I was angry and wondered why they weren't angry. We could do nothing except keep on plugging away and not be scared off the site," recalls Denise. [25] Where possible the retraining program attempted to avoid these problems by assessing the attitudes of the potential customer during the first meeting. If the customer displayed racist attitudes at the initial contact, the job was turned down. [26] But racism is not always easy to detect on a first meeting.

There were also incidents of overt racism that occurred to the retraining women while off duty. Sharon Murray, the foreperson, witnessed one such incident.

> We went for a drink after work – my [all-Native] crew and I. Two of the women went to the corner store for some cigs. One came out and got me and said that the shop owner was accusing the other woman of stealing. I walked in and said, 'Look, these women work for me and I can vouch for them.' He [the shop owner] immediately apologized and said he'd made a mistake. But what if I hadn't have been there? I was the White boss and so the shop owner stopped harassing the women.

In this case, the woman who was accused of stealing was the most senior Native woman in the program, respected by everyone. [27]

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[24] Email correspondence with Denise Needham, August 2003.

[25] Email correspondence with Denise Needham, August 2003.

[26] Valerie Overend, "Foundation for Success: The Story of the Women's Work Training Program in Saskatchewan," SaskWITT, Regina, 2001, p. 79.

[27] Interview with Sharon Murray, July 1999.

Another form of overt discrimination which the Native women faced was the lack of role models. This sent a subtle message of exclusion, that Native women were only welcome in subordinate roles. From the beginning of the program the co-ordinators hoped to hire Native women in leadership roles. Because they could not find any Native women with Journeyed Carpentry papers it was impossible to hire Native carpentry role models. They were delighted to hire one Native staff to do LifeSkills. Valerie, one of the co-ordinators of the program, described the LifeSkills coach as "a non-status Indian woman with cultural pride oozing from every pore of her body. No better role model could be found." But this was a part-time short-term contract. After one term, this woman went on to seek full-time secure employment that this retraining program could not offer her. Even after her departure, this woman remained a supporter, friend and occasional consultant to the program. [28]

The significance of the lack of Native staff became increasingly apparent later on in the program as Native participants increasingly out-numbered White participants. As Valerie explained, "In retrospect, a perfect fit would have been to include an Elder on staff or an Aboriginal LifeSkills Facilitator with a close connection to an Elder." [29] Sharon, the only female foreperson for the program, was also aware that the leaders were all White. "This was my first time supervising and it was a real learning experience because I hadn't been around their lifestyles that close before and a lot of them had a lot of problems... When they introduced me to their families they'd say this is our crew – we have six Native girls and a little redheaded White boss. It was quite funny." [30] Sharon said this program opened her eyes to racism. "No matter how good we are as instructors – we are still White. We can listen, we can be understanding but the fact is that we are not Native and so we just don't totally understand," explains Sharon.

> I got a picture of my grand baby. I've never ever told anybody because I didn't think it was an issue that my daughter-in-law is Native, and I showed them a picture of my grand son and he's as Native as can be... They looked at me and asked if my son is Native and I said no my daughter-in-law is Native. And it just kind of changed their whole attitude about things. [31]

Because of Sharon's attempts to bridge the cultural divide she was invited to many of the Native women's homes and to powwows and sweat lodges.

Sharon says she learned a lot about racist misunderstandings through this program.

> This was my first time as a boss and I had a whole Native crew. So when I first started working here they would come strolling in about

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[28] Valerie Overend, "Foundation for Success: The Story of the Women's Work Training Program in Saskatchewan," SaskWITT, Regina, 2001, p. 40.

[29] Valerie Overend, "Foundation for Success: The Story of the Women's Work Training Program in Saskatchewan," SaskWITT, Regina, 2001, p. 40.

[30] Interview with Sharon Murray, July 1999.

[31] Interview with Sharon Murray, July 1999.

> 8:20, grab a cup of coffee, sit in the smoke room and work is supposed to start at 8:00... So after a week I wait for everybody to crawl in and I said coffee's in the coffee room, grab your smokes, we're having a meeting. And I just let them have it – saying starting time is 8:00 and if they come late they must be prepared to stay late... I said I am not here to make friends, I am here to be your boss. And I didn't realize how much that would hurt them... Emily [one Native woman] took it to heart and said, 'You just told us you don't want to be our friend, that you're too good for us.' ... And so I had to call another meeting and I said what I'm trying to say here is we've got a job to do and I'm sorry I phrased it like that. [32]

Sharon was very concerned about creating a safe place for the Native women. "We are different from one another and we need to have some understanding within our crew. The [Native] women need to feel safe. If they can't be safe here where else can they be safe?" says Sharon. She was well aware of the racist attitudes of some of the White women in the retraining program. There were some White women that she would not pair up with Native women because she knew the White women were intolerant towards the Native women.

As this retraining program progressed the issues of exclusion altered to some extent. Over time Native (both Status and Métis) women in the program became role models in their own right. By 1999, the majority of the Board of Directors, the most senior women in the program, are Native women. Four of the six Board of Directors were Aboriginal (three Status and one Métis). [33] Yet this inclusion in the decision-making structure of the program does not negate the fact that there were many forms of overt racism both within the program and in the surrounding work environment.

IV. Subtle Racism

A number of incidents of subtle racism occurred during the retraining program that clearly indicated that participants and instructors were intolerant to cultural differences based on race. While there were misunderstandings between Status and Métis aboriginal women, the vast difficulties occurred between Natives and Whites. It is not uncommon for White people to want cultural differences confined to ethnic cultural days that do not interrupt their White-as-norm way of proceeding in the everyday world. And yet, it is clear from the everyday events in this retraining program that there were cultural differences in communication, family responsibilities and leadership styles.

Cultural differences in communication added to misunderstandings within the program. These differences were apparent in both LifeSkills sessions and worksite situations. Generally, LifeSkills education has been criticized for its generic approach to developing communication and problem-solving skills. As Shauna Butterwick, an expert in adult education explains, "These skills and the individualistic orientation ... reflect a middle-class and Western orientation." This focus on individual needs and interests is, at times, in conflict with Native values where people strive for harmony and balance within the family rather than individual gains. There is also the confessional aspect of LifeSkills that can be difficult for those who are marginalized. Women who already experience "othering" by society in general are asked to expose their private lives making them increasingly aware of how their lives do not fit the middle-class Western model. [34] Certainly, the Native women in the program spoke forcefully against the LifeSkills component. "I am not used to this LifeSkills," explained one Native participant. "It makes me very uncomfortable to talk about my family life, my difficult past experiences in front of all those eyes." [35] This confessional nature of LifeSkills is similar to the workings of many feminist collectives, where all participants are considered equal and where women are encouraged to reveal their pain, to individualize the racism, sexism, elitism that they experience and to purge their souls, absolving others of guilt and responsibility and assuming that the power structures could evaporate through such revelations. [36] This emotional and individual approach to systemic and unequal power relations does little to address the on-going nature of the everyday racism that Aboriginal women experienced in the retraining program.

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[32] Interview with Sharon Murray, July 1999.

[33] Interview with Valerie Overend, July 1999.

The jobsite was also an arena for misunderstanding due to cultural differences in communication. White women spoke of their frustration when Native women did not voice their opinions at the jobsite. "You never know whether they [the Native women] understand what you are trying to teach them or not. They don't speak up when they do not understand," explained Denise, one of the co-ordinators. [37] The difficulty of Native women's silence was exaggerated by the nature of co-operative work. Implicit in the nature of group work in the retraining program was the need for women to speak up about their strengths and skills, to talk about any difficulties with the job at hand. This was extremely difficult for some of the Native women and their reluctance to speak before the group was misunderstood by many of the White women as apathy rather than cultural difference.

There was also the difficulty that White women did not understand the Native women's non-verbal communication. Often the Native women did not make eye contact when an instructor or foreperson was relaying information. Sometimes the White women misinterpreted this as insolence, as a refusal to show respect to the White women in charge. Instead, Native women believed it was a sign of respect and deference to lower your eyes when addressing a teacher or leader.

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[34] Shauna Butterwick, "Life Skills Training: 'Open for Discussion'," Marjorie Griffin Cohen, ed., Training the Excluded for Work: Access and Equity for Women, Immigrants, First Nations, Youth, and People with Low Income, University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver, 2003, pp. 161-177, esp pp. 163 and 172-173.

[35] Interview with Anonymous Participant #10, October 1998.

[36] Srivastava capitivates the flawed nature of such 2nd wave feminist work in her article, "You're Calling Me a Racist," esp. pp. 47-49.

[37] Interview with Denise Needham, Regina Beach, July 1999.

The co-ordinators of the retraining program insisted that women within the program take leadership roles, be role models to other women, to advocate publicly for the program. This was extremely difficult for many Native women and led to frustration and misunderstanding. For instance, at one point a Toronto television journalist came to interview the Native women in the program. "Denise tried to talk to us about a week ahead of time to say he was coming out and we were kind of shy at the moment saying like we won't talk to him and all that but when the time came we were going to talk to him if he came out," explained Charlene, one of the Native women in the program. "Denise never brought him out [to the worksite], we never got to do the interview." Charlene was clearly upset by this experience but she also understood that Denise was equally frustrated. [38] All in all it was an example of White and Native women not understanding each other, of White women not giving the Native women enough time and support to do something which was culturally unfamiliar to them.

Another form of subtle racism that permeated this retraining program was the inclusion of Aboriginal culture in token ways. Whereas the predominant mode of communication and organizing in the program was the White norm, there were times when Aboriginal ways of knowing and being were included. At certain special moments in the program, there would be a sweet-grass ceremony. The co-ordinators also informed the participants about local pow-wows, teepee raisings and sweat lodges. [39] White women as participants and leaders of the program were quick to mention this as an example of how they were inclusive, and implicitly, not racist. I would argue that these ceremonies did not in any way challenge the White normative culture of the program and may, instead, have enhanced the exoticization and tokenism of Aboriginal culture.

Also there were occasions where Aboriginal women participants were singled out as role models, both in their own Aboriginal communities and when the media came calling. For instance, the Aboriginal women spoke proudly of their participation in creating an educational package on Native issues for the Saskatchewan public school system called "Choosing the Beat of Her Own Drum." To launch the curriculum packages, the program participants set up display tables. They displayed this package to teachers, students, and school administrators. After this public showing, one Native woman in the program said, "I have never been proud to be an Indian before and now I'm so full. I will never be ashamed again." [40] While these were important moments of inclusion for Aboriginal women, these were exceptions to the everyday practices of the retraining program. [41]

IV. Reactions

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[38] Interview with Charlene, October 1998.

[39] Interview with Valerie Overend, July 1999.

[40] Quote cited in Valerie Overend, "Foundation for Success: The Story of the Women's Work Training Program in Saskatchewan," SaskWITT, Regina, 2001, p. 95.

[41] For more details about the inclusion of Aboriginal culture see M. Little, *If I Had a Hammer*, pp. 84-86.

Given the epidemic nature of racism in Canadian society generally and Regina specifically it is hardly surprising that Native women experienced discrimination within this retraining program. However, it is the various reactions to this racism that are particularly noteworthy. First, the co-ordinators who designed a retraining program in Regina for low-income women were caught off guard when it became clear that the overwhelming majority of the program participants were Aboriginal women. Initially, the co-ordinators expected that the participants would be approximately two-thirds White and one-third Native, corresponding to the racial distribution of Regina's population. Instead, the reverse was true; approximately two thirds of the participants were Native (Status and Métis). Where the first intake of women participants was approximately half White, half Native, the second intake was entirely Native and the third intake was more than half Native. Also the retraining program was located in the industrial core where most of the Native population in Regina resides. This suggests that the co-ordinators did not fully appreciate the extent or nature of Aboriginal poverty in Regina. Albeit the Regina population is two-thirds White, the majority of Reginites living in poverty are Aboriginal. The statistics provided in the earlier theoretical section of this paper clearly demonstrate that Aboriginal poverty in Regina is profound and extensive. Even without knowledge of the statistics one only has to spend a day in Regina to recognize that Aboriginal people are clearly congregated in the poorest neighbourhoods of the city while you cannot find an Aboriginal person on the streets of the comfortable suburbs. When you socialize at the bars, cafes and restaurants you quickly notice that these social worlds are also as segregated as the neighbourhoods with certain ones visibly meeting places for Whites and others for Aboriginals. This visible demarcation helps to explain how White feminist co-ordinators who have progressive feminist politics can still remain rather oblivious to Aboriginal poverty in their hometown.

It is important to explore the reactions to both the overt and subtle racism that Aboriginal women participants experienced while in this retraining program. In regards to the overt racism, the White feminist co-ordinators and foreperson was shocked by these incidents. As a rule, the White leaders saw these incidents as individual, isolated, no matter how horrific and tended not to appreciate a systemic understanding of the racism that Aboriginal women experienced. What was interesting was how the White leaders of the program continued to be shocked as they described each separate incident to me. Whether it was the "No Squaws" graffiti at the worksite, the Aboriginal women accused of stealing a watch by a White customer, or the Aboriginal women accused of stealing cigarettes at the corner store, each incident was described to me by the White feminist leaders as shocking and almost unbelievable. In one case, one of the co-ordinators had to confront the racism of her own sister who was a customer. She seemed entirely unprepared for this possibility and continued to remain shocked when I raised the incident. Critical race scholars have referred to this shocked reaction as an "emotional attachment to innocence." They argue that 2nd wave White feminists work hard to maintain their innocence from accepting partial responsibility for the racism that women of colour and Aboriginal women regularly experience. [42] Because these 2nd wave White feminists believe themselves to be part of an ethical struggle to promote equality where they, themselves, are also victims, permits them to reject their culpability in racist acts. [43] This White feminist innocence is reminiscent of the innocence promoted by 1st wave White feminists during many of their campaigns for equality and social reform. In contrast the White participants in the program maintained their innocence of overt racism in a different manner. When I inquired about these overt racist incidents the White participants remained virtually oblivious to them claiming they had not noticed them or if noticed, had not considered them important.

Given the great extent to which Whites deny racism and even counter-attack those who relate racist experiences, it is hardly surprising that non-Whites are so reticent to raise the issue. This was often the case amongst the Native women in the program. The issue of racism came up during each of the four times I went to Regina to interview the women. The Aboriginal participants always seemed well aware of these racist incidents. They did not feign innocence but instead considered these experiences to be a normal part of their daily life. And yet, the Native women were hesitant to say that they, personally, had experienced racism in the program. Rather, they asserted that other Native women had experienced racism, and that they had heard of racist incidents, although they had not witnessed any. Generally, the Native women believed that racism occurred on a regular basis in the program, but they were hesitant to suggest that they had personally experienced this racism. [44]

As a result of these incidents, the co-ordinators decided to screen potential customers for racism before approving a work order. Also there was one workshop on racism provided for the participants. But there was no organized, on-going attempt to address the overt racism that Aboriginal women participants experienced and to forge on-going alliances between Aboriginal and White women against everyday racism. As a result the White feminist leaders of the program projected the image that these incidents of overt racism were unusual and isolated. And gave White participants permission to remain ignorant of and oblivious to systemic racism that their Aboriginal counterparts experienced on a daily basis.

In regards to overt racism that occurred *within* the retraining program, reactions were more emotionally charged. During discussions about racism within the retraining program the White women were often quick to defend their White peers and the White co-ordinators. As one White woman said,

> Denise and Val set up this program for Minorities and you have … got to have some wild huge heart in order to be able to do that… And how fucking dare you do that to these two beautiful women who created this

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[42] S. Srivastava, “You’re Calling Me a Racist,” pp. 35-36; Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack, “The Race to Innocence: Confronting Hierarchical Relations among Women,” *Journal of Gender, Race and Justice*, Vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 335-52.

[43] S. Srivastava, “You’re Calling Me a Racist,” p. 45.

[44] For more detailed discussion of these blatant forms of racism and the reactions see M. Little, *If I Had a Hammer*, pp. 72-76.

> thing for people like us. I just get so mad. How dare you scream and point a finger – racist – for the very person that gave you this opportunity.[45]

This is a very common reaction amongst Whites generally. When faced with questions about racism one of the first reactions is to deny it and then to defend others who are accused of racism. In fact, this woman is launching a counter-attack, arguing that it is absolutely unacceptable for anyone to have any problems with either the co-ordinators of the program or the program itself. Both are blameless. One White woman's denial of racism is quite aptly stated in her comments: "I just don't get it and *I don't want to get it*. [my emphasis] I don't want to be a part of it and I just think the whole thing is ugly."[46] Racism, if faced, would disturb in-group solidarity. It would ruin the good atmosphere of interactions that White people experience.[47] It is far easier for Whites, such as this woman, to simply dismiss such charges rather than to acknowledge that both they and their friends are racist in their attitudes and behaviours. Also, the fact that this retraining program is viewed in a charity model, as a program that helps uplift poor women makes it even more difficult to address issues of racism. As the White participant articulated above, there is little room to critique a program that is run on a White charity model steeped in moral undertones. The White leaders of the program are highly invested in their self perception as "good people" doing good for others who are less fortunate.[48] Consequently as a participant, one should simply be grateful for this opportunity.

The reaction to subtle forms of racism within the program is also important to address. When there are cultural misunderstandings, it is not a simple matter to resolve them. "You can't just shove issues or problems they are experiencing in their faces and expect them to talk about it. They [the Native women] would find that disrespectful and embarrassing," explained Sharon Murray, a White foreperson in the retraining program.[49] In some ways, exposing the problem can create further problems. White people can act defensive, hostile or simply dismiss the issue. They can also construct the problem so it appears that the Native women are creating the difficulties.

Many women in the program believed the solution to any cultural differences was to treat everyone the same. One White woman explained her insensitivity to Native women's issues this way:

> Qu: Do you think there are different things that could be done to support Aboriginal women differently through the program?

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[45] Interview with Anonymous Participant #6, July 1999.

[46] Interview with Anonymous Participant #6, July 1999.

[47] For further exploration of in-group solidarity when racist charges are raised see: Teun A. van Dijk, "Discourse and the denial of racism," Discourse and Society, Sage, London, U.K., Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 90.

[48] My thanks to Sarita Srivastava for her important work on the moralism embedded in 2nd wave feminist projects. S. Srivastava, "You're Calling Me a Racist," p. 41.

[49] Interview with Sharon Murray, July 1999.

> A: Not really, like we're all treated the same.
> Qu: But maybe Aboriginal women coming in are coming in with more difficulties – more alcohol problems maybe, more abusive partner problems.
> A: Yes, that's basically right. Like I've never had that situation before myself so I don't know how different it is.
> ...
> Qu: Well, do you have any ideas how the program could be more helpful around these issues?
> A: I guess they just have to help themselves first or you know get that help they need in order to be here all the time. [50]

This participant clearly took a liberal approach to cultural differences. She believed everyone should be treated exactly the same – i.e. according to White customs and rules. She saw no need for supports within the program that might help women from a different cultural background than her. She refused to see the colonial context from which Native women must negotiate their lives. She was not willing to accommodate any difficulties that Native women might encounter. In other words, she saw racism and the legacy of colonialism as a personal problem that Native women must deal with on their own.

Given these liberal attitudes it was sometimes difficult for the White women in the program to adequately comprehend these cultural differences. When questioned some of the White women participants seemed unaware of the heavier family responsibilities that the Native women carried. In addition, a number of the White women appeared frustrated when Native women were reluctant to take leadership roles. And most importantly, the White women in the program seemed to be oblivious to the everyday racism that the Native women experienced. These attitudes even permeated the minds of White women who had Native partners and Native children. This suggests that the cultural divide between White and Native women remains deep.

Also through their power as leaders, originators and co-ordinators of this retraining program White feminists were rarely challenged about their cultural biases or their ignorance about Aboriginal life and culture. As with most White-dominant feminist projects White feminists in this program could continue to assume that White ways of knowing and being in the world are the superior, if not the only ways. If other ethnic minorities suggest other ways of knowing and being in the world, Whites can choose whether to acknowledge this cultural difference or not. And even when White people acknowledge cultural differences, they can still assume cultural superiority. White people wear their Whiteness as a cloak from which they do not need to address discrimination unless they choose. This "normative Whiteness" can take several forms. It can devalue Native experience. It can promote a deeply ingrained sense of superiority of White culture. It can anthropologize Native culture by making the latter an exotic artifact that does not challenge White cultural attitudes in any profound way. It is the group nature of this racism that makes it so difficult to confront and challenge. The fact that most of the dominant racial group accepts that White ways of being in the world are superior turns racist incidents, no matter how common, into a personal, individual problem. *You*, the person who has experienced racism, become the problem because you have created division where White people see none. Such subtle but overwhelmingly powerful racism can force Native men and women to assimilate in order to survive. Native peoples have learned that it is best to think, speak and act White or risk being ignored, ridiculed or degraded. Such racism can also make Whites paralyzed or indifferent to discrimination when they witness it. And when all else fails and the issue of racism continues, Whites can simply insist that these experiences of racism are exaggerated or invented. [51]

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[50] Interview with Anonymous Participant #13, July 1999.

This subtle racism is further disguised in a country such as Canada where tolerance is promoted as a national myth. When White Canadians believe there is no racism it is extremely difficult for Aboriginal peoples to assert otherwise. When tolerance is assumed to exist "it is much more difficult for minority groups to challenge remaining inequalities to take unified action and to gain credibility and support amongst the White dominant group." [52] As a result, Native peoples can be accused of being oversensitive, exaggerating and over-demanding when they attempt to address the racist nature of everyday Canadian society.

V. Conclusion

There is much to learn from this retraining program. A theoretical lens that appreciates critical race theory (particularly active colonialism), moral regulation theory and the history of 1st and 2nd wave feminism is critical to begin to assess the overt and subtle racism that embodied much of this feminist project. In order to build future alliances between White and Aboriginal women it is vital that we learn from these mistakes. A feminist movement that fully embraces the intersectionality of race, class, gender and sexuality must address the many ways racism, and in this case colonialism, plays out both in feminist projects and in our larger society. And attention must also be paid to how White feminists react and anticipate issues of active colonialism, how they confront and challenge their White normative ways of knowing and being in the world that are steeped in moral undertones. In doing so White feminists need to take responsibility for their role in these unequal power relations, appreciate the systemic nature of colonialism and build alliances that more fully acknowledge differences and vast inequalities.

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[51] My thanks to Sherene Razack for her detailed list of types of subtle racism. Sherene Razack, "Racism in Quotation Marks: A Review of Philomena Essed's Work," Resources for Feminist Research, Vol. 20, Nos. 3-4, Fall/Winter 1991, pp. 148-151.

[52] For a wonderful discussion of the many subtle forms of racism and the many ways that the dominant racial group denies this racism see: Teun A. van Dijk, "Discourses and the denial of racism," *Discourse and Society*, Sage, London, U.K., Vol. 3, No. 1, 1992, pp. 87-118, quote p. 96.