Seeing Ourselves: Exploring Race, Ethnicity and Culture (3rd ed.)

Carl E. James. Toronto: Thompson, 2003, 233 pp.,
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Carl James, a teacher, philosopher, and skilled communicator, causes readers to self-examine their own understanding of who they are in terms of racial identity within their own sphere of existence. This book provokes thought, illuminates Canadian issues, and creates contextual buoyancy via student reflections that are sometimes ambivalent, even adversarial, but at the same time, quite good at showing student contradictions.

The introduction details how the book is constructed, as a series of issues woven together via personal narratives which give topics life beyond the conversational level. The notion that teachers teach who they are, in spite of the fact that many do not have a clear understanding of their own racial or ethnic identity, is put forward. James also takes time to remind us that, “the act of telling stories and relaying personal narratives pushes individuals to face their flaws and errors as human beings as well as shedding light on the ways in which institutions and systems often miseducate and diminish people.” The point is then supported, as most points are within this book, with scholarly quotations and evidential material that enhances the credibility of the assertions.

Exploring the first few chapters is similar to exploring a buffet. We often take an item or two that we do not like, and in fact the item may offend us to the point where we push it off to the side of the plate and leave it there. A reader may react this way as James boldly defines “culture” using various suggestions from other well-intentioned authors. The limited two-page glossing over of such an important definition and pivotal mental construction can become a point of irritation. However, the definition of culture is revisited much later on. James then dives into several well documented perceptions of cultural identity and tells us that many ‘white’ people avoid seeing themselves in racial terms in order to suppress negative and stereotypical images whites have of other racial minority groups. The impulsive reader may put the book down at this point. James eventually instills a sense of balance, later on.

The book has several strengths, for instance its inclusion of useful tables that have been inserted to give the reader a broader understanding of such things as ethnic origin. In addition, James supplies several figures that support the text and provide further insight into James’s line of thought. For instance, recent court decisions can be better analyzed when more of the context is presented in figures and tables. As well, James pushes us to examine recent court rulings in which race mattered as evidence that racism exists in Canada, and is something that children need to be protected from. Following this revelation is a table that notes how everything around us is inter-related and that this metaphor of the equal inclusion of all races of peoples within the wheel of life can actually be misleading.

The many student reflections are explicit, unpolished, and relate smartly to points within the text. One student wrote about “how race has always been an unstable identity that changes according to family, peers, partner relationships and maturity.” James is careful to cover varied ethnic backgrounds common in Canada, so that most readers at some point can connect personally with the text. In other words, we hear from students who are Black, White, Native, Polish, Irish, Jewish, Ukrainian, Catholic or simply confused about their heritage. The author does caution the reader to remember that these individual accounts cannot be generalized to others, not even to those of similar ethnic and racial backgrounds. This is a basic tenet of narrative research of which some readers may not be aware.

The paperback is inclusive and considers the individual first, then delves into the various groups in society such as the family unit, with its various roles and power differentials. James explains, with the help of selected authors, how these structures and functions impact upon behaviour and the very development of individuals in society. Obviously, ethnicity influences family function and/or dysfunction in our Canadian mosaic. The chapter on familial and social influences revisits familiar ground, including such topics as biological makeup, social networks, institutions, social class and societal tensions. It is these elements that are targets for the emancipatory writer, James, as he struggles to get the reader to see what he, and others who have carefully examined the Canadian fabric, perceive.

James continues to impress upon the reader that racial and ethnic identity is a product of many factors outside the home such as schools, churches, workplaces and media, which teach that some racial and ethnic group members do have privileges that others may not. This of course is not a new reality. The book is a means to address what some may think is invisible; yet upon reading the text the reader is better equipped with vision that is informed, detailed, and in colour. If we were suddenly given night-vision goggles, much of what was hidden in darkness would be in view. The book is a means to see in the dark, as we are reminded of employment inequity and reverse racism. These elements can be compared to the maxim that ‘we may be cut from the same cloth, yet it is now multicoloured’. James wants us to view ourselves as united yet distinct; informed and aware of our race, ethnicity, class, and gender, and the extent to which they impact our daily lives.

The contrast between the United States and Canada emerges late in the book as James suggests that our multiculturalism is different from the assimilation practiced in the United States. The Constitution of Canada is quoted to prove just how we differ in this area. We read about Trudeau’s declaration, which really is an attempt to bring focus to an elusive area of concern. Indeed, James asks the reader: “Can this belief in cultural pluralism as the very essence of Canadian identity be practiced in a society in which inequity and racial and ethnic stratification are institutionalized?” It is this type of question that moves the reader. After all, schools have remained largely unchanged in the past century as traditional lines of philosophy are ‘Canadianized’ to assimilate immigrants and minorities. James addresses briefly “the cultural debasement and social

indoctrination of the Aboriginal peoples.” He explains key elements of the Indian Act, and then turns his attention to the educational system.

Teachers, we are told, “have a responsibility to acknowledge, not only the student’s cultural perspective, but also their own, which will influence the teaching-learning process.” James further explains that there is a “tendency for educators to assimilate anti-racism into an already ineffective multicultural framework which is a reflection of the philosophy of equity and democracy of multiculturalism to which Canadians subscribe.” This need for complete change and re-conceptualization is paramount. Teachers can and do teach who they are, and many attempt to bring the curricula alive via structures and systems that impose and direct the very lessons they have creatively devised. However, much of this is done while ignoring the hegemonic nature of the dominant culture which is based on its own privileges accrued from class, race and gender. James would like to see a re-education of the teachers in institutions that have been redeveloped in order to improve the final product, or ‘who’ teaches ‘what’. Education is a powerful tool and with the right directions, it can be used to produce citizens who are aware of who they are, where they are and how they should function in Canada.

In sum, James has added clarity and focus to many issues that are difficult to discuss and unknown to many. This text educates readers about the depth and breadth of racism, discrimination, prejudice and ignorance in Canadian society. He does this using student voices that jump from the pages as the reader’s eyes pass over. This three-dimensional characteristic is uncommon and only a few texts can actually compel a reader to think beyond what is written. James achieves this feat. For some, this text may be a missing link, or it could be an awakening.

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