

Book Review

Power, Race, and Higher Education: A Cross-Cultural Parallel Narrative. Kakali Bhattacharya and Norman Kent Gillen, 2016, Boston: Sense Publishers.

Rosemary C. Reilly

Concordia University, Montreal

Every so often, a book comes along that changes everything: how you envision teaching and mentoring students; how you approach ways of knowing, reflection, and writing; how you imagine disseminating research; and, for some of us, how you come to understand your life and legacy of privilege. The slim volume, *Power, Race, and Higher Education: A Cross-Cultural Parallel Narrative* is one such book. Written by Kakali Bhattacharya, a well-respected qualitative researcher and decolonizing/transnational scholar and Norman Kent Gillen, her former PhD student, co-author in this enterprise, and adjunct instructor, it is a finely crafted layering of narrative, reflection, and theory in an artful form. Available since the fall of 2016, it already has received the 2017 Outstanding Book Award from the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry and is the winner of the American Educational Research Association's 2017 Outstanding Publication Award. Written in the first person in parallel narratives, it courageously tells the story of a Brown-skinned woman, born in India, having lived in Canada and the US since the age of 14, who "mentor[s] students and teach[es] them about ethnicity, race, multiculturalism, within the context of designing and conducting qualitative research projects" (Bhattacharya & Gillen, 2016, p. 1) and a White man, born and raised in Texas, who is on the

“receiving end of such mentoring where he has to interrogate his privilege as a White man” (p. 1) as he conducts his dissertation on the educational experiences in the 1950s and 1960s of a Chicana woman also from Texas. Embodied in this riveting story are the tensions and dilemmas that are suffusing our current lives, as scholars, as students, and as citizens:

- How can we, as teachers and supervisors, bring our students to a place where they can confront the intersection of the difficult questions within our disciplines, society, and their own complicated histories without employing the stick of our institutional power or shame-based practices?
- How can we conduct cross-cultural qualitative research without replicating patterns of complicity, marginalization, and oppression?
- How can we as White scholars, students, and citizens engage in difficult conversations about race, minus the destructive defensiveness of White Fragility (DiAngelo, 2011), in order to understand how whiteness, privilege, and white supremacy function in our material lived realities?
- And perhaps the most pressing question of all, how can we cross the divide created by deep values-based differences and histories of oppression, surfacing our individual and collective wounds as we engage in the messy but critical work of bridge building and allyship while walking in integrity?

This is the central core of this book as it attempts to create a transparent dialogical space to explore these crucial questions.

The book is loosely divided into six chapters, which chronicles their falling apart and coming together as Kakali and Kent ¹ attempt to negotiate their supervisor-student relationship- a struggle that becomes something much larger and deeper.

We cannot deny the suffering of our fellow human beings when we benefit from the very same conditions that produce the suffering. Yet we cannot deny the anger we feel inside when we experience suffering as individuals and as a collective.

How do we then move beyond that which divides us to discover what connects us in our shared humanity? (Bhattacharya & Gillen, 2016, p. xix)

The authors do not pretend to have a definitive, prescriptive answer to this question. There is no magical solution or shallow *we are all the same under the skin* moment. But they do, honestly, fearlessly, painfully, and with integrity, share the story of their attempts to make their way through this messy journey.

At the beginning of each chapter, Kakali provides an introduction that contextualizes her experiences, both in the present as Kent's supervisor, as well as her own personal and professional lived histories that inform and shape her current understandings and subjectivities, while Kent provides his own biographical narrative and perspectives to conclude the chapter. In between, they seamlessly add layers of cross-cultural theories that expand our knowledge and intensify our grasp of who they are as people and scholars. In addition, they employ the technique of ethnodrama ² to illustrate a variety of situations and a shift towards an imaginal way of knowing: aspects of Kakali's relationships with Kent and Caroline, an older White woman,

¹ I refer to the authors by these names, simply because that is how they refer to themselves throughout the text. This is not meant to infer familiarity nor imply a paternalistic lack of respect for their status and accomplishments.

² An ethnodrama is a written play script consisting of "dramatized, significant selections of narrative collected through interview transcripts, participant observation field notes, journal entries, personal memories/experiences, and/or print and media artifacts such as diaries, blogs, e-mail correspondence, television broadcasts, newspaper articles, and court proceedings and historic documents" (Saldaña, 2011, p. 13).

mentor, ally, and Kent's original supervisor; conversations with the ghosts of former teachers, mentors, and others, or as Anzaldúa (2015) describes "spirits" from whom one obtains healing insights bringing them back to help one's community (p. 32); and the educational experiences of Angie, the Chicana woman who generously shared her life with Kent, which formed the foundation of his dissertation ethnodrama. The book is a powerful and accessible read, but far from an easy one, especially when reflecting on a life filled with privilege.

The book operates on at least four levels. The first, and most substantial, is a model for how one can engage in reflecting and articulating one's experiences of race (and to a lesser extent, gender) that inform our positionality. The book opens with Kakali, and then Kent, revisiting their histories growing up and how each of them came to understand what it meant to be racialized, unpacking their values, assumptions, beliefs, and privileges. In a sense, this introduction to Kent is where he ends up after his work with Kakali and his own intense self-examination. As a White, cisgendered woman, born and raised in the highly segregated Philadelphia of the 1950s and 1960s, I frequently found myself reflecting on my own life and how in many ways, I, like Kent, prefer to avoid rather than acknowledge, the privileged dimensions of my identity.

The second significant theme is the challenging nature of supervisor-candidate relationships. Effective supervisors do more than help students write their dissertation (Blair, 2016). They serve as role models, socializing students into the sociocultural dimension of the discipline and academia, by understanding and adopting its values, methods, and ways of constructing knowledge (Fanghanel, 2009). In this respect, personal and academic identities become situated in a process of co-participation and engagement (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which is the essence of navigation of a PhD program and writing a thesis. Learning to become an academic and scholar is an identity process that involves moments of tension and struggle that are best supported in

relationship and in community. This story is at the heart of Kakali's and Kent's rocky relationship. Kent is a White man, a thoughtful and intensely introverted doctoral student who is attempting to tell the story of Angie and her resistance to the constraints placed upon her by a White Anglo-centric school system and social structure. Through much of the book, Kent believes he is able to tell her story in an objective, detached way, justifying his location as narrator of her experience by using verbatim excerpts from interview transcripts and a Chicana feminist lens. Kakali, as a teacher committed to social justice and ethical research practice, rightfully asserts he must first unearth his own privilege and positionality in order to illuminate how these shape his understanding and retelling of Angie's racialized and gendered experiences. Their contrasting narratives illustrate the different perception each holds about the other. Their relationship does not go smoothly. Perhaps, the expectation that it will reflects my own internalized Teacher Savior script, a variation of the White Savior script (Boyd, 2016), even though Bhattacharya is South Asian. And herein lies the power of the book. It invites you into their relationship, as one of the many ghosts haunting the edges of their interactions, welcoming you to engage in the same reflective excavations. Ultimately, there is an impasse. This impasse represents a fundamental educational question: How can we as teachers have students arrive at a place where they can encounter what they resist or avoid, but is fundamental to their ethical, intellectual, emotional, and professional growth?

Situated perspectives frequently appear silent on the issues of privilege and hegemony in communities of practice. A learner's positionality within a situated system is often conceptualized simplistically as the general movement from "peripheral participation" to the "center" of the practice community. This notion is problematic since it presumes the existence of an identifiable center and appears unconcerned with hierarchical membership status. This stems

from the lack of attention to the power relations saturating human cultural systems and the issues of who has the power and how power relationships affect learning (Hansman & Wilson, 2002). How Kakali navigates this terrain of supervisor-student power relations provides an insightful window into how this can be done within an ethic of compassion, but with an unflinching adherence to integrity, ethical principles, and sound pedagogical practices. She does not take him by the hand and lead him to racial enlightenment; she does not become angry, or disparaging, or bullying- all too common practices in higher education. She does not wield the stick of institutional power by dumping him. Rather Kakali insists that he do the work himself (as we White students and scholars must). Even through moments of frustration, she maintains a zone of proximal development that resembles a compassionate encounter (Goldstein, 1999), even when she puts her foot down. In merging compassion with the co-construction of academic identity, she broadens our conception of the teaching-learning relationship and enhances our understanding of the role played by challenge and support in epistemological transformation and development.

The third major level is that the book functions as an exemplar of arts-based research practice and dissemination. Told in narrative, buoyed by theory, and framed throughout with artistry in the form of ethnodramatic episodes and peppered with examples of personal photos and artifacts, it represents a stunning work that embodies the essence of what Leavy (2015) describes as a space “within the research community where passion and rigor boldly intersect *out in the open*” (p. 3). It is an inspiring hybrid work that demonstrates the blending of self, art, and method in the service of troubling and complicating contemporary notions of cross-cultural qualitative research, race, teaching, multiculturalism, power, and mentoring.

And last, but not least, this book provides a catalyst for transformation in the classrooms of higher education, a tentative step towards healing. This can be achieved by the use of this book as a course text in any undergraduate or undergraduate class whose focus is qualitative research, race, ethnicity, and culture studies, thesis or dissertation writing, or critical scholarship. An added benefit is the inclusion of customizable pedagogical practices for use in any classroom. I would even suggest that some of these could be adapted to professional development seminars offered by university teaching and learning centers to activate discussions of whiteness and white supremacy within the academy. Blending a variety of practices and ways of knowing, the authors also offer important guidelines for establishing a climate in the classroom that does not replicate the dynamics of oppression.

Antonio Machado stated in his book of poetry, *Campos de Castilla: Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar* (Wanderer, there is no road, the road is made by walking) (p. 238). This must-have book is both timely and long overdue, and well worth any investment of time and energy to walk the road alongside Kakali and Kent- now more than ever.

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