

## **Cultural Competency as New Racism: An Ontology of Forgetting**

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*This article argues that cultural competency promotes an obsolete view of culture and is a form of new racism. Cultural competency resembles new racism both by otherizing non-whites and by deploying modernist and absolutist views of culture while not using racialist language. Drawing on child welfare, cultural competence is shown to repeat what Lowe (1993) calls an ontology of forgetting Canada's history of colonialism and racism. A recommendation is made for jettisoning cultural competency and emphasizing instead a self-reflexive grappling with racism and colonialism.*

**KEYWORDS** *cultural competency, new racism, postmodernism, colonialism*

Despite the popularity of discourse about cultural competency in social work, it is not without critics (e.g., Baskin, 2006; Gross, 2000; Sakamoto, 2007; Yee and Dumbrill, 2003). Sakamoto (2007) argues that cultural competency views culture as neutral and devoid of power. Cultural competency, therefore, does not theorize power or critique systems of oppression such as racism, sexism, ageism, heterosexism, and ableism (Sakamoto, 2007). Cultural competency seldom analyzes the role of whiteness in social work (Sakamoto, 2007). Whiteness is “a form of hegemony that allows one group to use its power to dominate a group in a position of lesser power” (Yee & Dumbrill, 2003, p. 102). Whiteness is, according to Sue (2006), the “default standard . . . [f]rom this color standard, racial/ethnic minorities are evaluated, judged and often found to be lacking, inferior, deviant or abnormal”

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(p. 15). Sakamoto (2007) contends that social work is built on this foundation of whiteness. Cultural competency, then, is implicated in broader social work discourses, which are founded upon whiteness.

The implication of cultural competency in whiteness is evidenced in how it constructs “other” cultural groups, because whiteness is the standard by which cultures are differentiated. At this juncture in history, cultural competency bears striking similarities to new racism (Barker, 1981). The term *new racism* refers to racial discrimination that involves a shift away from racial exclusionary practices based on biology to those based on culture (Goldberg, 1993). Cultural competency, like new racism, operates by essentializing culture, while “othering” non-whites without using racist language.

In this article, I argue that cultural competency promotes an obsolete view of culture and is a form of new racism. Cultural competency resembles new racism by otherizing non-whites by deploying modernist and absolutist views of culture, while not using racist language. I assert that cultural competency is also an ontology of forgetting Canada’s history of colonialism and racism. Drawing on child welfare, I show how cultural competence repeats this ontology. I conclude by recommending the jettisoning of cultural competency and emphasizing, instead, a self-reflexive grappling with racism and colonialism.

## CULTURAL COMPETENCY AND NEW RACISM

Cultural competency’s depoliticized view of culture as neutral and not implicated in power relations (Sakamoto, 2007) is evidenced in definitions of cultural competency. Green (1999) defines cultural competency as the ability to “deliver professional services in a way that is congruent with behavior and expectations normative for a given community and that are adapted to suit the specific needs of individuals and families from that community” (p. 87). Culture, according to Green, is “not something the other has, such as a specific value or a physical appearance; it is rather the “perspective that guides our behavior . . . they are the meanings two people act on in a specific relationship” (p. 14). Similarly, the Child Development Institute (2007) defines cultural competency as “a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes and policies that enables effective work in cross-cultural situations” (p. 4). They define culture as the “integrated patterns of human behavior that include the language, thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of racial, ethnic, faith, or social groups” (p.4). These definitions understand culture without considering power and how individuals of cultural groups come to be “othered” (Sakamoto, 2007). Without considerations of power, cultural competency overlooks how knowledge of cultural “others” is created; returning to Green’s (1999) definition of culture, the issue of cultural competency overlooks who exercises power to define meaning, perspective, and the “other” and how meanings

and perspectives relating to the “other” are often caught up in discourses that uphold whiteness as the default standard.

How individuals come to be “othered” is often implicated in oppressive processes of marginalization, such as colonization and racism. For example, cultural deprivation and subculture theories pathologize the cultures and members of minority groups (Mullaly, 2002). The separation of self and other effected by othering maintains and reproduces imperialist and colonialist discourses, which include social work. Thobani (2007) makes this point by asserting that child protection services build upon the colonial legacy of the residential school system by stereotyping Aboriginal mothers and native culture as being deficient.

Cultural competency discourses that define cultures without consideration of power and that do so in stereotypical ways resemble new racism. New racism is racial discrimination that involves a shift away from racial exclusionary practices based on biology to practices based on culture (Goldberg, 1993). The concept of new racism gained prominence in Great Britain in the 1980s as scholars began theorizing the policies and practices of Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government. New racism, according to Gordon and Klug (1985), is “essentially a theory of human nature and human instinct and most important among such instincts is the supposed desire of human beings to be among the company of their own kind” (p. 14). New racism is difficult to recognize as racism because racist discourses are interwoven with discourses about social cohesion, cultural preservation, and nationalism, which discriminate without actually using the word *race* (Barker, 1981; Miles & Brown, 2003; Smith, 1994; Yon, 2000), thus avoiding “older definitions of race that were so evidently tainted by Hitlerism” (Barker, 1981, p. 25). It is, according to Barker, a “struggle to create a new commonsense” (p. 25), one that would elude accusations of being racist. This new commonsense deploys culture in ways that, like cultural competency, do not consider power.

The rationale for the new common sense was to discriminate without being open to accusations of racism. This is accomplished by theorizing about culture without considering the power relations implicated in colonialism and racism. Barker explains new racism as:

. . . a theory that I shall call biological, or better, pseudo-biological culturalism. Nations on this view are not built on politics and economics, but out of human nature. It is in our biology, our instincts, to defend our way of life, traditions and customs against outsiders—not because they are inferior, but because they are part of different cultures. . . . For we are soaked in, made up out of, our traditions, our culture (Barker, 1981, p. 23–24).

In the above statement, human nature is argued to be a product of culture. Proponents of such a view are able to defend against allegations of racism

because they assert that they are not purporting that biological or racial differences exist in human nature among racial groups, but rather it is differing cultures that give rise to differences in human nature (Barker, 1981). This move thus uses culture, not racist language, to justify why people would by nature prefer the company of their own cultural group members. Nowhere in such understandings of culture are power and racism.

New racism also uses culture to explain differences between people and nation, resulting in what Barker explains is a theory that “justifies racism. It is a theory linking race and nation” (Barker, 1981, p. 22). The link between race and nation, with culture serving as the linchpin, is evident in Thatcher’s February 1978 denouncing of immigration on the grounds that Britain would be “swamped”:

That is an awful lot, and I think it means that people are really rather afraid that this country might be swamped by people of a different culture. The British character has done so much for democracy, for law, and done so much throughout the world that if there is any fear that it might be swamped, then people are going to be rather hostile to those coming in (cited in Solomos, 1989, p. 129).

Solomos (1989) highlights how Thatcher’s comment enacts racism while not having to resort to racist language. In Thatcher’s statement culture serves the role of signifying, or “othering,” non-whites. The concept of culture deployed by Thatcher is modernist, essentialist, and absolutist (i.e., pure, without any mixing). The effect of this use of culture is that it constructs non-whites as belonging outside of England. In other words, English culture is associated with whites only. This racist exclusion achieves its effect by never having to invoke racist language. This strategy makes new racism difficult to identify as racism.

The new racism of the Thatcherites has not gone away. Rather, more recently, following the horrors of 9/11, new racism has found resurgence in civilizational discourses that conceptualize culture as being composed of absolute, fixed, observable, and immutable attributes. Samuel Huntington’s (1993) clash of civilizations thesis has been promoted to argue for the inevitability of war between the United States and the Muslim world because of the purportedly different civilizational cultures (Razack, 2005). Razack contends that the thesis of clash of civilizations constructs non-Western cultures as backward, archaic, patriarchal, and in need of the assistance by the West to bring the former into modernity. Gilroy (2005) explains that “absolutists” such as Huntington have “contributed something to the belief that absolute culture rather than the color is more likely to supply the organizing principle that underpins contemporary schemes of racial classification and division” (p. 37). Gilroy highlights that social

constructions of absolute cultures, so central to new racism, is a pressing problem today.

Cultural competency seems to disavow the ways in which employing absolutist, essentialist, and modernist definitions of culture share striking similarities with new racism's theory of culture. Like new racism, cultural competency otherizes non-whites, using culture to do so, all the while never having to invoke racialist language. Like new racism, cultural competency relegates cultural "others" as belonging outside of the nation, different from what is ostensibly (white) "Canadian culture." In other words, reminiscent of Thatcher's fear that people of other cultures would swamp Britain, cultural competency also constructs cultural "others" as coming from somewhere else, not from Canada. Yet implicit in cultural competency is the notion of a pure Canadian culture, which elides the Aboriginal peoples and the long-standing history of Chinese and black people in Canada (Pon, 1996; Walcott, 2001). When cultural competency constructs knowledge of cultural "others," it forgets the history of non-whites in Canada and how this troubles, even renders absurd, any notion of a pure or absolute Canadian culture. Moreover, it is extremely difficult to recognize cultural competency as racism because it discriminates and otherizes without using racialist language. Because of these similarities, I contend that cultural competency is a form of new racism.

#### CULTURAL COMPETENCY: MODERN AND POSTMODERN VIEWS OF CULTURE

Like new racism, cultural competency assumes, not unlike Thatcher and Huntington, that culture is a collection of absolute, stable, fixed objective traits and values. This absolutist view of culture recalls anthropology's modernist theories of culture. Yon (2000) contends that modern anthropology adopted the theory of culture as "attributes and distinguishing features of a community" and resulted in "the practice of recording and analyzing the traits that distinguished communities and groups" (p. 8). Currently, this practice has been "critiqued for objectifying and fixing cultural differences and for bringing to bear Western-centered assumptions upon the study of cultures considered non-Western" (Yon, 2000, p. 8). Moreover, it assumed that an objective scientific truth about a culture could be recorded by anthropologists (Yon, 2000). Yet despite anthropology's own critique and skepticism of its modern history (Clifford, 1986), cultural competency persists, not unlike new racism, to promote a modernist, absolutist, and anthropological view of culture.

This is evident in the many cultural competency texts that, like modern anthropology, list behaviors, traits, and values of various cultural groups. For example, Green (1999) lists cultural contrasts between African-Americans and Anglo-Americans while noting that important "from the perspective of the

cultural competence model, is, what generalizable statement would be more true for specific service populations” (p. 207). Although Green is careful to emphasize that such cultural contrasts are merely “provisional and hypothetical” (p. 207) starting points for thinking about different cultures, such contrasts nonetheless recall modern anthropological theories of culture as objective truth. Cultural competency can thus be understood as new racism inasmuch as its understanding of culture effects the same essentializing constructions of culture deployed by Thatcherites and Huntington. Like new racism, proponents of cultural competency are able to promote racialized and stereotypical views of cultural groups without ever having to use racist language.

What then are the stakes in viewing cultural competency as a form of new racism? One consequence is the revealing of cultural competency as an outdated, theoretically obsolete social work response to social differences. The obsolescence of cultural competency becomes most striking when considering its disavowal of postmodern theoretical advancements around culture (Gross, 2000). Yon notes that in the 1980s, a new phase of cultural theory emerged and was called the “postmodern turn” (Yon, 2000, p. 9), and it has influenced all disciplines, including anthropology (Clifford, 1986) and social work (Fook, 2002; Gross, 2000; Hick, 2005; Mullaly, 2007). Cultural competency’s disavowal of the postmodern turn, however, renders cultural competence theoretically and practically obsolete.

This postmodern turn challenged the notion of a unitary fixed subject and embraced the instability of meaning. Disciplines, including social work, began to move away from grand theories toward an interest in partial truths. Postmodern understandings of culture shifted from being “a stable and knowable set of attributes” to the view of culture as a “matter of debate about representations and the complex relationships that individuals take up in relation to them” (Yon, 2000, p. 9). Stuart Hall (1989) and Gosine (2000) have proposed the view of cultural identity as being nonessentialist but, rather, highly discursive and linked to how subjectivities are formed through desire, language, and representation. As such, there are no essences to subjectivity; subjectivity is constructed precariously (Weedon, 1987) and is constantly in the process of becoming (Hall, 1989). Hall explains cultural identity in the following statement:

It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute return . . . it is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification which are made within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning (p. 71).

This postmodern view of culture and cultural identity is rarely taken up by proponents of cultural competency. Instead, cultural competency persists to endorse modernist and absolutist notions of culture.

Even when postmodernism is invoked by proponents of cultural competency, the definition of culture often remains situated in modernism and absolutism. For example, Green (1999) discusses postmodernism as a critique of how claims of scientific validity may be “class or culture bound” (p. 43). However, he does not apply postmodernism to trouble modernist constructions of culture itself. Postmodern views of culture would understand that there is no pure, static, or monolithic culture to speak of, let alone use as “provisional and hypothetical” starting points (Green, 1999, p. 207). In light of postmodern contributions to understanding culture’s complexities, cultural competency’s insistence on essentializing culture renders discourses of cultural competence outdated.

Postmodern views of culture acknowledge that “culture is not as simple as we want to make it” (Gross, 2000, p. 49) and moreover, there are “too many differences—too many to master to achieve cultural competency” (p. 59). Raymond Williams (1988) asserts that “culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (p. 87). Highlighting the complexity of culture and critiquing cultural competency is not to downplay the significance of culture and the importance of respecting service users’ identities and their subjective experiences. Gross (2000) notes that “as elusive as culture can be, especially the culture of ‘others,’ there is little that is more important. Culture composes one’s humanity” (p. 61). Pozatec (1994), echoing the significance of culture, writes: “This awareness of our own subjective cultural experience and that of our clients must be accorded privileged status” (p. 399). One way to privilege subjective cultural experiences might be, according to Gross and Pozatec, for social workers to gain awareness of how our own subjectivities influence how we construct and interact with others. In this way, the focus would not be so much on mastering cultural knowledge but on understanding how knowledge is constructed and contested (Gross, 2000).

In the next section I discuss Lowe’s (1996) ontology of forgetting Canada’s history of white supremacy, colonialism, racism, and sexism as a way to understand the persistence and precariousness of an obsolete discourse such as cultural competency.

## CULTURAL COMPETENCY AS ONTOLOGY OF FORGETTING

If cultural competency discourses in social work reify culture in modernist and colonialist ways, then why the persistence in our profession of this knowledge construction of culture? What passions of social work propel the persistence of cultural competency, despite its obsolete theory of culture? To respond to these queries I borrow from Lisa Lowe (1996), who discusses an ontological forgetting that characterizes nation-states such as Canada. She argues that in nations such as Canada, the brutalities of genocide

against its Aboriginal peoples (Baskin, 2006; Monture-Angus, 1995) give rise to an ontology of forgetting. This present ontology of liberal democratic nation-states such as the United States and Canada involves forgetting the history of white supremacy, racism, and Western imperial projects that proved central to the states' formation and ascendancy (Lowe, 1996). Such acts of forgetting include the elision of the Canadian nation-states' annihilation of its Aboriginal peoples.

To be sure, the profession of social work is implicated in the cultural genocide of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. The infamous "sixties scoop," in which high numbers of Aboriginal children were removed from their families by social workers, highlights social work's implication in Canadian colonialism and white supremacy (Thobani, 2007). This recalls Weaver's (1999) contention, which I believe applies equally to Canada, that "social workers must understand the atrocities of the indigenous holocaust in this country and the unresolved pain associated with it" (p. 221).

The ontology of forgetting also recalls the elision of Canada's sinophobic and xenophobic characterization of Chinese indentured railway workers as "heathens" and the "Yellow Peril" (Pon, 1996) and its deadly relations with black Nova Scotians (Winks, 1971). Roy (2003) asserts that the virulent state racism practiced against the early Chinese settlers was fueled by desires for a white Canada. These aspects of a modernist project of white supremacy are implicated in the nation-building history of Canada. The ontology of forgetting this history perpetuates the view of Canada as a fair and tolerant society, despite the reality of pervasive racism (Henry, Tator, Mattis, & Rees, 2000).

Yet systemic and structural racism persists in Canada today. Canada's colonial and racist relations with Aboriginal peoples continue as evidenced by the Ontario Provincial Police's shooting death of Aboriginal activist Dudley George in 1995 and the inability of Canada to resolve outstanding Aboriginal land claims (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). In his book, *Canada's Economic Apartheid*, Galabuzi (2006) calls attention to systemic labor-market discrimination that racialized groups continue to face in Canada.

Cultural competency is a manifestation of an ontology of forgetting Canada's contentious relationship with non-whites. Social work's investment in cultural competency discourses may, in part, be symptomatic of social workers' desire to believe that Canada is largely a fair and tolerant society. Indeed, one of the greatest challenges to whiteness is an acknowledgement of the social violence enacted in the name of maintaining white superiority. Cultural competency discourses free social workers from having to confront whiteness and Canada's history of white supremacy. In other words, cultural competency constructs knowledge about cultural "others" in a way that does not challenge social workers' sense of innocence and benevolence.

Social work's passion for cultural competency fails to acknowledge that in our post-9/11 world, discourses on racism are often won or lost according

to definitions of culture. If, indeed, cultural absolutism underpins much of today's racial exclusionary practices (Gilroy, 2005), then what is at stake in contemporary racism is the understanding of culture. Like new racism, cultural competency ossifies culture as absolute. Accordingly, depoliticized and obsolete views of culture implicit in cultural competency render this social work approach as being unable or unlikely to grapple with contemporary forms of new racism and racial classifications that are predicated on culture.

## CULTURAL COMPETENCY AND CHILD WELFARE

Cultural competency debates in child welfare evidence theoretical tensions around modern and postmodern understandings of culture. Este (2007) and Kufedlt, Este, McKenzie, & Wharf (2003) discuss the need for cultural competency within child welfare. However, these authors seem to invoke modernist understandings of culture. For example, in an examination of critical issues in child welfare by Kufedlt, Este, McKenzie and Wharf (2003), Este writes a subsection on cultural diversity in child welfare. Este discusses individual racist and sexist attitudes and beliefs of workers. He advocates for the worker's needing to know her or his own culture as well as the culture of the clients (Kufedlt, Este, McKenzie, & Wharf, 2003). However, this reifies culture in modernist ways, overlooking how culture is fluid, contested, hybrid, and not absolute (Gosine, 2000; Yon, 2000). This is evident in the following passage:

Social workers must be cognizant of the shifting nature of culture. For example, newcomers to Canada are likely to retain the parts of their culture they regard as important and to embrace certain aspects of Canadian culture, thus forging a new culture that will evolve, develop, and change over time. Because of this fluid notion, the process of becoming culturally competent is an ideal state, but one with no end point. It is conceived as a development process that requires life-long learning (Este, 2007, p. 95).

Here, Este captures the postmodern notion of the fluid, even hybrid, aspects of culture, yet falls into the modernist trap of reifying culture as a set of fixed, knowable, and more-or-less stable attributes that one might choose to retain or embrace. According to this approach, it is possible to compile a crude modernist cultural checklist of an individual's embraced Canadian cultural attributes and retained cultural traits.

Moreover, Este (2007) locates the notion of culture as being associated with the bodies of newcomers. Implicit in this assumption is Canadian culture as neutral or devoid of power. In other words, Canadian culture is ostensibly definable and normative, whereas newcomers would be bringing

their cultural attributes to Canada. Este's position epitomizes Sakamoto's (2007) contention that cultural competency discourses fail to interrogate how individuals come to be "othered." Clearly, the modernist notions of newcomers and Canadian culture are central aspects of the process of othering. The concept of the newcomer and Canadian culture reify the former as "other." In this way the newcomer is socially constructed as being different from Canadians and belonging outside of the nation-state. According to this logic, the newcomer and the Canadian culture are mutually exclusive and binary categories. Yet, noting that black people have been in Canada for hundreds of years, cultural theorists such as Walcott (2001) argue that the history of Canada reveals a "willful attempt to make a black presence absent" (p. 128). Cultural competency often reproduces the absencing of the black presence in Canada. In other words, what is at stake is the defining of the term *Canadian culture*. Would Este's definition of Canadian culture include the presence of long-standing black Canadians and how their contested presence in the nation troubles any attempt to define an absolute Canadian culture?

That even such a perceptive and critical scholar as Este (2007) can fall into the trap of reifying culture shows how we all are vulnerable when trying to buttress cultural competency discourse by struggling to define culture within the limitations of the discourse's parameters. Thus, even while attempting to reconcile modernism with postmodern understandings of cultural identity, cultural competency's intense focus on the mastery of culture proves to be what Gross (2000) calls overambitious. In persisting, nonetheless, to focus on mastering culture, cultural competency repeats the ontology of forgetting the nation-state's and social work's oppressive historical encounters with its cultural "others." Out of this forgetting, much like new racism, exclusionary ideas of race, nation, and belonging become reproduced by cultural competency, all the while using culture in place of racialist language.

## CONCLUSION: JETTISONING CULTURAL COMPETENCY

Because of the obsolescence of cultural competency and its resemblance to new racism, I recommend that it be jettisoned by social workers. Letting go of this discourse would help us to not forget but rather to remember social work's own modern history. Moreover, this remembering might help us slow down and resist what Britzman (2000) calls a "rush to application" (p. 204). She writes that:

[W]e would have to think about how the teaching techniques we offer induce compliance in the form of our students quickly taking techniques to their classrooms [the field]. This rush to application and to what is

mistakenly called “the practical,” would, of course, be compliance to the dominant rule that knowledge use is strictly defined by its capacity to be externalized and applied to others (p. 204).

Britzman’s admonishment against rushing to practice alerts us to how cultural competency is symptomatic of this tendency. The rush to apply knowledge to others coalesces with social workers’ self-regard as benevolent and innocent. In other words, attention is quickly placed on the “other” whom we are “helping,” rather than on ourselves. Are cultural competency discourses a manifestation of a rush to practice?

Indeed, rushing to practice is, according to Britzman (2000), often related to a refusal to engage with learning about social violence, such as colonialism, racism, and slavery, which can cause intense difficulty for learners. Britzman calls information about social violence “difficult knowledge” (p. 21). Such knowledge is difficult for learners because learning about racism often entails the challenging work of self-knowledge, including acknowledging how we are all implicated in contradictory relationships of oppression. Cultural competency thus shields students and social workers from the difficult work of self-reflexivity. If we acknowledge the obsolescence of cultural competency and jettison it, we might then be less concerned about quickly mastering and applying knowledge to others and instead prioritize self-knowledge, particularly our flights from engaging with issues such as racism and colonialism. This recalls Gross’s (2000) caution that “mastery of minority content may not be possible, and those who believe they have such mastery are in danger of understanding clients too soon, too superficially” (p. 47).

Proponents of cultural competency might do well to heed Gross (2000) and forgo the overambitious effort of trying to master cultural content; instead, they might focus on how knowledge of “others” is constructed in the first instance. This would enable social workers to be attentive to new racism and reject disciplinary parochialism by embracing postmodern debates about culture as contested knowledge. We might then, in productive moments of self-reflexivity, remember what it is that we work so hard to forget.

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