

# Racism

Melinda Moore Meigs

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Racism is such a vast and pernicious process in our lives that this article can do little more than raise a very few issues: how racism came to be on the conference agenda; how the presenters at the conference gave very thoughtful and thought-provoking workshops under extremely difficult circumstances; how racism swirled about unconsciously at the conference; and steps that might be undertaken in the future.

At a week-end spree a couple of years ago, various ordinary members as well as board members had a think tank meeting where the desire for links with a wider cultural base was expressed. Members of AHP and AHPP thought that, as the organisations were almost entirely white, it would be a good idea to forge connections with other organisations such as NAFSIYAT and RACE, a division of BAC. I think with hindsight that when the conference on boundaries and borderlines was discussed at board level, and a specific request made to address racism, the idea of forging links with the above organisations became confused with the task of looking at the boundaries of racism within ourselves and our institutions. The result was that when Zah Ngah and Naz Keval of NAFSIYAT and Zack Eleftheriadou of RACE were invited to give workshops on aspects of racism, not enough thought

was given to preparing the ground for their work.

This happened in a number of ways. For example, the workshop leaders appeared to be the only non-white people present. Although a seemingly clear programme was provided, some delegates wondered if 'these people' had been invited — the unconscious message being that somehow they had intruded, had crossed some invisible boundary. They and their work were then perceived to be marginalised, isolated, tucked away in some ghetto. This perception was enhanced by the fact that two of the presenters could only come for one day. The angry feelings that this aroused and the criticism of them and their scheduling can be seen as an attempt to isolate the presenters in order to avoid dealing with delegates' own unconscious anxieties. So few people availed themselves of the opportunity to meet the presenters when they were there and to grapple with the pain and anxiety that the presenters looked at in their workshops, that the three presenters amalgamated their work in the Saturday afternoon session. They had never met nor worked together before and under these extremely awkward and difficult circumstances gave much to think about.

In this session, through background context and thinking about different as-

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pects of racism and case studies, participants began to see how we all have unconscious defences around hatred and anxiety which are completely split off and denied and projected onto others. How habitual, effortless, ugly and rageful we can be without ever realising it.

These unconscious processes around the hatred of difference were then played out in the conference as a whole and particularly in the plenary session. Here small groups were invited to speak with remaining workshop leaders to feedback loose ends. Because Zah and Naz were unable to be there, their names were placed on a card on the circle of chairs and I symbolically took their role. A couple of people came to speak with me. One said, as if the roles were now reversed, that she wished she had come to the workshops but felt she did not have the 'right' clientele. She had no non-white clients and therefore would not 'fit'. Another wanted to look further at how the theme of intrusion plays a part in racism and how this may be serving other unconscious purposes. After this, I sat alone for about twenty minutes. Eventually a couple of people joined me for the space to think and feel.

Thinking about the workshops and the processes described in them, I felt as if I had held the unconscious hatred of about 130 people for twenty minutes. Projections do cross the boundaries, do get inside the skin. Sitting there holding the intolerable fragments of 130 others was a very painful experience, not to be quickly processed and immediately fed back to the group as a whole. The plenary was almost unbearable in its glibness and wish to deny the deeply disturbing unconscious forces within us all and within AHP and

AHPP. I am grateful that at least one person from the group led by Zack found a voice to raise again the issue of racism.

Before this experience I thought, wrongly, that I had some idea of what it might be like to be black in this society. I have had to deal with immigration men and I am regularly asked, even after 20 years, when am I going home. But when I did get home, to London, and no longer had to be brave, I processed for many hours some of this experience. When I thought about what it might be like to have non-white skin and to hold the unconscious hatred for millions and millions of people for the rest of my life, there seem to be no words available to convey or contain the pain.

We desperately need to address racism in ourselves and in AHP and AHPP. The depth of the unconscious denial is massive. It is extremely difficult to stay with the pain and to find a voice and words to say it. But we are just decorating if we are making ourselves look and feel better by being 'right-on', politically correct and spouting equal opportunities. This is a cover-up for thinking and a way of avoiding our unconscious life.

I think this was the first time that racism was on the conference agenda. That is a positive step. But it might be useful for people individually and for AHP and AHPP to join forces with other organisations such as BIIP (Hilde Rapp), RACE (Zack Eleftheriadou), and NAFSIYAT (Lennox Thomas) who have recently held a very well organised and thoughtful symposium at Goldsmiths on racism. They will be following it up with other events. See you there.