

“Race” and the Difficulties of Language

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“Race,” a construct created by scientists, is deeply ingrained in everyday discourses. Using postmodern theories to help us think through the complexities of language in relation to race, we come to understand that *truths* about race are changing, contingent, and contested products of cultural construction. It is impossible to understand or represent race as an *object of study* such that it can be *known*, yet untouched, by language. Health effects are one important consequence of race, particularly related to quality, access, marginalization, and privilege. Analyzing the effects of race bring it visibly into being, and makes evident how language shapes our understandings of the world and its human inhabitants. **Key words:** *deconstruction, feminist, postmodern, race*

POSTMODERN theories, like feminism and deconstruction, help us think through the complexities of language in relation to important and consequential constructs like “race.” The language chosen for the recent ANS issue on “Ancestry and Ethnicity,” for instance, surfaces some of the complexities of the language of race. Research shows that nursing scholars understand race, ancestry, and ethnicity in many different ways, and as interchangeable concepts.¹ For example, skin color is often assumed to be an unspoken distinction among races, although some cultural discourses also constitute skin color as an indicator of ethnicity or ancestry. What, then, are the relationships between ancestry and race, and between

ancestry and ethnicity? Does the word *ancestry* sidestep the political and historical residue associated with race and the consequences of belonging to a particular race? What meanings adhere to language that describe boundaries between humans? What does the language of race speak and what are its effects?

Dictionaries function as a source of *truth* about race, ethnicity, and ancestry, but these, too, are problematic. The Oxford English Dictionary,² for instance, defines *ancestry* as “the relation or condition of ancestors; progenitorship; ancestral lineage or descent. Hence, distinguished or ancient descent.” In the same source, *race* is defined as a “group of persons, animals, or plants, connected by common descent or origin.” Definitions of both ancestry and race end up referring to “descent,” while *ethnic* is defined as “pertaining to race.” Thus, we are caught in a continuous process of deferral, back to where we started, with no foundational definitions of race or ancestry or ethnicity that do not refer to or assume each other.

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It is clear that race is not a neutral, harmless, easily defined, demographic variable among a list of other demographic variables, such as age or birthplace. As a construct that is culturally determined, race is one way that boundaries between groups of people are created, and as such, is an organizing principle of everyday life. Originally applied to groups that shared some close relationship, it has shifted to being applied to much broader groups, utilizing physical, religious, and/or language qualities as a basis for assigning various groups to a single entity called "race."³

Nobles argues that racial and ethnic categories are "intellectual products, social markers, and policy tools"^{4(p1745)} that have been forged through mechanisms of colonization, immigration, and other political projects.⁵ European explorations in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries led to the *discovery* of groups of human beings whose physical appearances and cultural practices differed from their discoverers. Created in the scientist's lab to assist with the study of differences in terms of skeletal measurement (especially craniums), skin color, hair texture, and other bodily characteristics, race emerged as a potent force in the larger social environment. There it served as the foundation for a complex and detailed human classification system. Nevertheless, the supposedly fixed characteristics currently used to demarcate populations from one another are actually arbitrary boundaries. That is, racial classification simply do not align well with most patterns of gene frequencies in human population groups. Bodily features that exist between various populations, for example, are often due to geographic gradients.⁶ However, while critical analysis like this explicates the construction of race as an historical invention, it is a mistake to assume that such an invention is not a durable and powerful

strategy for perceiving and understanding the world.⁷ In Western societies, race functions as a means of creating a sense of group cohesion and identity that can be used as the basis for claims of superiority or rights over those seen as exterior to the group.⁷ As such, the words we use and the meaning that language carries has import for health-related policies and research, and for health care.

Postmodern frameworks are useful in raising critical questions about race and for exploring the purposes race serves in contemporary society.^{5,8-15} From these frameworks, truths about race are assumed unstable, changing, contingent, and contested products of cultural construction. Understanding the construction and the contingency of a particular definition are aims of much postmodern social and human science that focuses on race. Embedded in particular historical cultural discourses, it is impossible to understand or represent race as an *object of study* in such a way that it can be *known*, yet untouched, by language. Benhabib,¹⁶ for example, argues that language is no longer understood as originating with the individual and as a reflection of the private content of individual, human consciousness. Instead, critical postmodern perspectives on language assume that people participating in cultural conversations share the understandings produced by the language of these conversations.^{12,17-22} Thus, language constitutes the realities of race; language does not transparently reflect some innate, or natural, true meaning about race.

By questioning basic assumptions about race, as well as gender and sex, postmodern feminist scholars debate the usefulness of these simplified and seemingly transparent categories in social and human science research.^{1,23} Race is complex and its effects are multifaceted. Any study of race, therefore, will be

complicated, requiring a critical approach. La Veist²⁴ argues that research and scholarship on race and its connection to health is far too difficult, and far too valuable, to be given anything less. The epistemological and theoretical turn toward postmodern theoretical frameworks moves questions about the nature and consequences of race, ethnicity, and ancestry to the center of inquiry. Feminist scholarship, as one postmodern framework, has produced an enormous body of work on women, gender, and identity. Because of the significance of women, gender, and identity to feminist research on race, this paper presents an accounting of some key feminist positions, before moving on to poststructuralist frameworks.

FEMINIST THEORIES

Feminist theories are diverse, and feminist theorists disagree about the best way to approach gender. Most,^{17,25-29} however, concur that over time, behaviors have come to be gendered, and moreover, that Western cultures have come to be gendered. Additionally, many contemporary feminist theorists^{8-11,30,31} agree that gender cannot be separated from other social categories, particularly race and class. That is, constructions of gender are simultaneously constructions of race, and constructions of race are simultaneously constructions of gender.^{9-14,23,27,30-33} Thus, the social is intricately gendered and racialized, affecting in diverse ways, the health and lives of all people in Western cultures.

FIRST WAVE FEMINIST THEORIES: A DIFFERENCE WITH MATERIAL CONSEQUENCES

First wave feminisms took note of women's "differences" and stimulated de-

bates on women's individual and collective sociopolitical interests and self-determination. This led to a new political identity of *women* and demands for economic and professional equality with men. Beauvoir³⁴ theorized that women's social functions are interdependent with maternal and natural functions, but not dependent on biological givens. She argued that society establishes the male as a positive norm and woman as the negative norm, the second sex. Working from biological, psychoanalytic, and Marxist theories, Beauvoir showed how woman as the Other dominates all aspects of social life and social discourse. Although Beauvoir's theory assumed a fairly homogenous "woman," it was a significant step in understanding social construction of difference and how dichotomies such as culture/nature and norm/other (ie, man/woman, White/Black), place Others in inferior positions.

SECOND WAVE: A CORNUCOPIA OF FEMINIST THEORIES

Feminist theories about sex and gender have become more complex in second wave feminism. In general, these theories move away from stable and unifying analytic categories to contingent, changing, and often contradictory understandings of gender, race, class, and sexuality in attempts to destabilize presupposed assumptions about unity. In spite of this move, and the production of theories attending to race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality differences, and towards the inclusion of more women's voices and perspectives, feminist theories tend to fall back on some version of social construction essentialism and/or biological essentialism.³⁵

Allen explains that "essentialism assumes that words refer to or name things and, when several things are referred to

or named by the same word, that they must share characteristics, a core set of traits, or an *essence* that justifies using the same word to refer to those various objects.^{36(p159)} This essence is irreducible, permanent, and therefore, constitutive of the person or thing. From this perspective, essence and definition function similarly. When understood as essential, core identity, gender, and race are assumed to be determinate and not changeable. For example, femininity and masculinity are often assumed tied to biologically sexed bodies that naturally come in two discrete and distinct anatomical forms. Another essentialist perspective claims that men and women have a fixed nature that is "god-given," while a third essentialist perspective assumes that commonality of experience exists among women or men across time, context, and cross culturally. Thus, the man/woman and sex/gender binaries are necessary for the many contemporary feminist theorists trying to disrupt them. Claims about essentialism in relation to gender and sex are similar to claims related to race. Scientific inquiry often operates under the assumption that there is an essence to being one race and not another, with some foundation that is usually tied to a particular biologic body. Even for those who argue against such an essential, core identity, those arguments rely, in some paradoxical degree, on essentialism.

The continuing debate on essentialism centers around the strategic and political usefulness of identity categories and unified experience, and on the unintended consequences of employing these ways of unifying identity and experience. Elam³⁷ argues that woman, sexual difference, the gender/sex binary, and women's experiences cannot be fixed, because there is no final ground to which one can refer. Meanings, Elam explains, are infinitely deferred

and always exceed any understandings that attempt to explain them. Because there is no natural woman, sexual difference, or women's experiences, feminism is ethically obligated to all women. Moreover, identity politics, which imply a fixed ground and are always exclusionary, are not workable solutions for feminism.³⁷

From many theoretical spaces in feminism, however, there is a fear that postmodern feminism may fragment gender to the point of subverting women's solidarity and political attempts to provide for all women liberal, human rights. Within liberal ideology and human rights discourses, multiplicity and heterogeneity are contained under the rubric of sameness. An essential notion of woman holds *sameness* in place. Postmodern and postcolonial feminists point out that sameness privileges Western, White, heterosexual, middle class women, and that it is through this privileged subject position that Other voices are mediated.³¹ The logic here is that difference is articulated and reconciled through reliance on assumed sameness. That is, the essential colonizes difference. Primary questions are What are the effects of a strategic use of a unified voice? Will marginalized racial and ethnic groups disintegrate politically if we do not hold on to African American or Hispanic or Native American or Pacific Islander? Is there an essential raced self? Essentializing and defining have consequences for those both included and excluded from the essence or the definition.

Second wave feminist theory, drawing from Foucault, focuses in new ways on the body related to identity and to how gender operates in society.^{26,27} Foucault popularized the idea that historical/cultural discourses and practices are productive in the sense that they function to produce particular ways of understanding and particular kinds of bodies. Gatens²⁷

describes how construction of identities goes beyond the idea that bodies preexist and are represented by language. Cultural discourses, history, and social practices construct bodies differently with particular kinds of power and capacities. Born into historical language that constructs bodies differently with capacities unequally invested, Gatens emphasizes that bodies are not neutral objects upon which a narrative is imposed. "The human body is always a signified body and as such, cannot be understood as a 'neutral' object upon which science may construct 'true' discourses. The human body and its history pre-suppose each other."^{27(p132)} A body's skin color, for example, carries with it specific power and abilities. The raced body, similar to the gendered body, is not a neutral body.

DESTABILIZING THE GROUND OF FEMINIST THEORIES: ATTENDING TO RACE

An important theoretical advance in second wave feminism is the identification of feminism and its theories as Eurocentric and oppressive to women of color. The inattentiveness of feminist theories to the social constructing of raced identity have come under critical scrutiny, primarily by women most subject to the regulations of these discourses. Although many feminists^{10,17,25-27,32} have analyzed the essentializing tendencies of diverse feminist theories, the work of feminists from African, Asian, Latino, and other non-European ethnic and national heritages destabilize the gendered center of feminism.^{8,10,11,31,38,39} Consequently, an increasing number of feminist theories are incorporating race, class, and gender as either interlocking systems of oppression, or as mutually constitutive practices of identity formation.^{8,10,11,32,33}

Higginbotham,¹² for example, instructs feminist scholars to position the unstable, complex, and shifting category of race in the foreground of feminist theory. Criticizing the notion of race as a simple and self-explanatory category, Higginbotham conceptualizes race as a metalanguage that subsumes other socially constructed categories like gender, class, and sexuality, and speaks the intersections of these categories in historically contingent ways. Stressing that it is not possible or useful to separate racialization of categories like gender, class, and sexuality, from their historical origins in the social context of US slavery, Higginbotham argues that race, as an effect of the metalanguage of race, is always present and must be continuously problematized.

Another important aspect of Higginbotham's thesis¹² about the metalanguage of race is that race functions as an oppressive/liberationist binary. First, the metalanguage of race continually positions "White" as the superior end of gender, class, and sexuality binaries, while reproducing "Black" gender, class, and sexuality as the inferior end of the binary, thereby maintaining dominant power relations. Differences among Whites and among Blacks recede to the background, and race functions as a monolithic and homogenous sociohistorical understanding of human difference. For example, a recent examination of the nursing research literature revealed that sample populations were predominately White and that any distinctions within various populations (eg, Whites, African Americans, Hispanics) went unexamined and unmentioned.¹ Secondly, for Higginbotham, the metalanguage of race also functions as a voice of liberation. By uniting Blacks in a shared cultural identity (thus, appealing to some essentialist self), she argues that the metalanguage of race

functions to destabilize White supremacy and makes resistance possible.¹²

Another aspect of contemporary race analysis and destabilization of the gendered center of feminism is the focus on Whiteness. Razack¹³ claims that capitalism, patriarchy, and White supremacy form an interlocking system of oppression. Dominant groups, like men and Whites, both inadvertently and consciously, always participate in relations of subordination. In U.S. academia, for example, Whiteness is the social context. A White person arguing in this context and assuming a position of subordination (ie, White woman) is arguing from positions of innocence and unacknowledged complicity in relations of domination, and is likely to (re) produce these relations. Moreover, how a voice is heard is locked into larger, dominant narratives. To be heard and understood, voices must be disciplined to produce stories that fit into dominant White male (supremacy) discourse. Poststructuralism and deconstruction can help us understand the complexities of the language of race and notions such as metalanguage of race, disciplined vocabularies, voices, and bodies, and essentializing identities.

POSTSTRUCTURALISM AND DECONSTRUCTION

Poststructuralism, understood here as under the broad umbrella of postmodern philosophies, works specifically to move understandings away from the assumption of essential structures underlying objects of study like bodies, race, sex, and gender. It assumes that meaning is constituted through language and is not guaranteed by the subject which speaks it.^{19,20} Deconstruction, in poststructural discourses, is a theoretical per-

spective, an intellectual movement, and a subversive mode of reading texts.⁴⁰ It, and other postmodern positions, challenge the boundaries of traditional research, including the categorization of participants, and the very foundations of science itself.^{18,41}

Drawing on the work of Heidegger, Nietzsche, Freud, and Saussure, Derrida,¹⁹ who is closely associated with poststructuralism and deconstruction, is concerned about the assumption that words and language transparently connect to an unchangeable and nondisputable reality. That is, an "actual object," like race or gender. Derrida, on the other hand, however, understands language as a system of relationships among words and symbols or signifiers that are not guaranteed by reference to a "real" or actual object that exists outside of language. Allen⁴² uses an analogy of the dictionary and the fact that when we look up one signifier we get other signifiers that are associated with the first through their differences, as seen in the example about defining race, ancestry, and ethnicity noted at the beginning of this article. Historical examination of words and symbols shows that association among these signifiers changes and is dependent on context. Similarly, meanings or significations have no *meaning* in and of themselves because they too are a system of relationships among signifiers. Meanings are likewise dependent on history and context. Associations made between signifiers and their signification depend on the audience. Moreover, embedded in cultural conversations since even before birth, the history of the audience members in discourses influences the associations they make and how they are positioned in relation to meanings.

Deconstruction can also help us understand that relationships between

signifiers are not neutral. They are constructed hierarchically, in the form of binary oppositions and Derrida understands these oppositions as unstable. The practice of deconstruction is used to destabilize seemingly fixed binary "realities," thereby undermining the assumption that meaning is secured by reference to a fixed center or guaranteed norm. That is, deconstruction demonstrates that one can never reach a stable meaning to provide a foundation for an entire system of meaning, perspectives, or truths.

For example, the function of history in creating value-laden, hierarchical, and oppositional racial binaries is evident in US society through citizens who "talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence."^{14(p17)} Although race is more than a solely Black versus White issue in Western societies, Toni Morrison contends that US culture has been shaped more by its historical encounters with Africans, than by encounters with Native Indians, and Mexicans. She comments:

In what public discourse does the reference to black people not exist? It exists in every one of this nation's mightiest struggles. The presence of black people is not only a major referent in the framing of the Constitution, it is also in the battle over enfranchising unpropertied citizens, women, the illiterate. It is there in the construction of a free and public school system; the balancing of representation in legislative bodies; jurisprudence and legal definitions of justice.^{14(p65)}

History, meanings, categories, definitions, concepts, or social codes can be understood as a binary "center" (ie, truth, foundation, norm) in the Derridian sense, because they are each a particular way of understanding some aspect of the social

world as the truth in relation to a background of what they are not. Both parts of a binary are always present, although it often takes deconstructing the binary to surface both ends of the pair and to call into question the center or norm. The reproduction of the White/Other binary is illustrated by an advertisement posted in the Chronicle of Higher Education for an "Other race recruiter." This recruiter would be responsible for the recruitment of "other-race students." Here the superior, privileged ends of the binary, White recruiter and White students, are the invisible, assumed, and reproduced centers against which the "Other race" is constructed and understood as inferior, marginal, and/or not the norm.

Derrida's work has significant implications for understanding the uncertainty of the language of race. However, to understand the construction of hierarchical binaries and the entrenched discursive resistance to nonhierarchical difference, a theory of power relations embedded in the constructing process and a theory of subject production must be included in poststructural work. The next section draws on Foucault's discourse theory and power/knowledge, and focuses on the work of cultural discourses.

FRAMEWORKS OF KNOWLEDGE/ POWER: THE WORKINGS OF CULTURAL DISCOURSES

What we "know," our understandings of ourselves, the world, and ourselves in relation to the world, we only know in language that we inherit through participating in cultural discourses from the day we are born (D. G. Allen, oral communication, June 2000).⁴² Cultural discourses are understood here as language in the shape of written, verbal, and performed

frameworks of knowledge. They are socially produced and reflect the prevailing cultural assumptions. These discourses, upon close examination, are complex and contradictory. The particular conversations that we, as individuals, take up may appear to have a direct correspondence with the truth of a situation, but they are, in fact, present to us only in relation to other possibilities that are unfamiliar or invisible. Thus, the unusual (to us) is marked as different and, possibly, as inferior.

Foucault argues that knowledge is power because knowledge is able to impose a particular idea of what is right on people under the illusion of Truth while feeding the discursively produced desire for truths.^{21,22,43} Knowledge/power in the form of discourses becomes an authoritative way of describing and every description produces and regulates what it describes. That language in the form of definitions, categories, explanations, and descriptions feels true and commonsensical is a way that knowledge is power. This power, however, does not repress, it is productive in the sense that it creates the (only) possibilities from which we can understand ourselves and phenomena around us. In this sense, people are the subjects of knowledge, created as a particular kind of individual through knowledge. This is problematic because knowledge does not create all possibilities as equally valued. As noted, knowledge creates possibilities in hierarchies and binaries like normal/abnormal, good/bad, nature/culture in reference to, for example, race, gender, behavior, and appearance.

Knowledge would not be power and would be less of a concern if we could stand outside of it to make comprehensive assessments of the available possibilities. But this is not the case. An aspect of the power of knowledge is that we

are always inside it. We are inside language, inside linguistic frameworks of understanding from which we know (understand) ourselves, ourselves in relation to the world, and the world in relation to ourselves. To know is to participate in the complex matrices of knowledge/power. The language we use for viewing and understanding is the language that produces us as viewing and understanding in particular ways.

Discourses proliferate through cultural systems like the human sciences, the justice system, popular media, the government, educational systems, and so on. They divide up the world in specific ways (for example, in the racial and ethnic categories devised by the US Bureau of the Census). Human science discourses are imbricated with other cultural discourses, and like other discourses, they function to produce a discursive web that creates possibilities for understanding. Foucault^{21,22,43} calls human science knowledge/power, disciplinary power. Institutions like hospitals, courts of law, prisons, factories, and schools are cultural systems that (re) produce, primarily, the prevailing dominant discourses through disciplinary power. They function to hold in place complex webs of discursively produced social relationships and practices, institutionalizing them and strengthening their persistence.

Deconstruction, discourse theory, and analysis of knowledge/power challenge "taken-for-granted" cultural definitions and demonstrate the effects of language in creating the appearance of "real" categories and understandings. Foucault^{21,22,43} argues that contrary to common sense, seemingly stable and true definitions of, for example, illness, sexuality, insanity, and criminality have changed considerably over the course of Western history. Instead of being connected to an unchanging essence, his work

demonstrates how pervasive understandings are connected to particular ways of viewing. When abnormality is defined, it is defined in relation to norms that are constructed from prevailing dominant values and beliefs. Foucault's research into discourses of medicine, criminal law, and sexuality shows that distinguishing between normal and abnormal appears simple, but is, in fact, quite difficult as the border between normal and abnormal is hazy, contested, contradictory. The appearances of clarity, coherence, and a "natural" division are effects of knowledge/power.

CONSTRUCTION AND CONSEQUENCES OF RACIAL IDENTITY AND "NATURAL" DIFFERENCE

At the heart of the dialogue about race is a politic about identity and difference, and about how identities are constructed, regulated, and remade. As Crawford argues, "images of self are crucial for determining how the other is imagined."⁴⁴(p1347) Protecting the self's identity borders and fortifying images of others as Other are sets of strategies to protect the self from the stigma and taint of "less-than-ness" associated with those not a member of one's identity group.⁴⁵ Thus, the self and members of nonstigmatized groups have a vested interest in reproducing stereotypes, even inadvertently. Crawford suggests that in a "risk-conscious era, the 'healthy' self develops an even greater investment in the delineation of boundaries."⁴⁴(p1357) Risk extends beyond fear of disease and illness—of 'contamination' from someone else, for example, in the case of AIDS—to risk that encompasses areas of society, such as housing and employment. In communities where a certain identity is required (eg, being White, or middle class,

or heterosexual), difference is treated as a violation of community values and the communities remain closed, disallowing any opportunity for equality. Members of these communities, thus, become intent on maintaining the differences.

Another way differences are maintained and reproduced is through racial and ethnic categories. These categories are analytic tools—that is, discourses—created and utilized by academicians and scientists to mark an assumed boundary between humans, and in some cases, to make sense of the actions of people under examination. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) mandates that the race of research participants be noted—even when race is not a variable of interest—when applying for funding and reporting results of funded research. This practice is required despite NIH's statement that "the [racial] categories . . . are social-political constructs and should not be interpreted as being anthropological in nature."⁴⁶ Examining nursing research for use of race and ethnicity as research variables before and after the institution of the NIH mandate, Drevdahl et al¹ found increased use of race and ethnicity after the mandate. In many instances, however, the racial and ethnic categories were not defined, nor were the methods used to determine a research participant's race or ethnicity identified. Thus, the use of categories to mark race implies difference among categories, yet, without explicit analysis, the categories are left to speak for themselves via the dominant cultural discourses that constituted them.

Postmodern theories argue that race and racial categories are products of history and society's cultural imagination. This philosophical position, however, does not ignore the consequences that race and categorization have for those who are constructed as members of privileged or marginalized categories.

Race is not in our heads because it is real, but rather it is real because it is in our heads. Armed with archetypal notions of the "Great Chain of Being" and other vulgar analogies drawn from casual naturalistic observation, human beings have laid their hand upon the social organization of their species and made it so. Through this process of *reification*, there have arisen true and substantial differences in physiological and health status between racial groups.^{47(p101)}

Language and understandings that come to be in our heads have real life consequences. Telles and Murguia⁴⁸ report, for example, that Mexican American males with dark and native American phenotypes earn significantly less income than do Mexican American males with more Euro-American phenotypes. In addition, misclassification of an individual's race or ethnicity on public health data can lead to under- or overestimating the burden of morbidity and mortality for particular racial and ethnic groups. Stehr-Green et al claim that misclassification of American Indians on Washington State death certificates is 14.7%, with the authors noting that the "misclassification is systematic (ie, it varies directly with year of death and urban residency and inversely with blood quantum) and that these biases may be worsening over time."^{49(p444)}

Krieger,⁵⁰ Williams,⁵¹ and other researchers point out the tremendous gaps in health status, access, and quality of care, that exist among various racial groups. Whites consistently have better health outcomes as compared with other racial/ethnic groups. Measuring disparities in health, however, is wholly contingent on who ends up in each racial and/or ethnic category. Decisions about categorization are clearly cultural and historical as "all categorizations are forms of myth and tend to get brittle around the edges."^{47(pp102-103)} Attempting to es-

tablish a benchmark by which to determine the truth of racial and ethnic categorization schema, scientists, in the end, often fall back on the only *solid* grounding they have, which is that "*people are who they say they are*."^{47(p103)} Invisible in this assumption is the position that people are born into a history and culture that tells them who they are. Scientists, therefore, end up studying, rather than questioning, the categories they construct and are trained to use in their research. It is reproductive practices like this that function to institutionalize particular ways of dividing up the world, and of understanding these divisions.

Persistent attention to particular racial and ethnic groups as suffering a disproportionate share of certain illnesses or diseases (a common strategy in health disparity research) also reinforces the belief that interventions around disease prevention and health promotion are the primary solution to these problems. This position ignores other larger socioenvironmental issues such as poverty, unemployment, and inadequate education. In addition, it suggests that larger problems of violence, drug abuse, and crime would be virtually unheard of if these racial and ethnic groups did not exist.⁵² This perspective is so entrenched that whole industries have sprung up around racial and ethnic differences, including health conferences, national initiatives, and centers on health disparities in *vulnerable* populations (eg, the National Center on Minority Health and Health Disparities). The reality that contemporary language conflates race and ethnicity with vulnerable populations can be understood as a historical and politically correct shift from the dominant culture language of 50-100 years ago when race and ethnicity were more explicitly conflated with non-White and inferior. Language change notwithstanding,

discriminatory practices continue to produce adverse health outcomes, much of which are unresearched and undocumented.⁵⁰ That is, the language of vulnerable populations may seem innocent, but it is marked by racial difference and carries with it historical and linguistic baggage that have material effects.

CONCLUSION

Having escaped from the researcher's workroom, race, ethnicity, and ancestry are a customary part of the sociocultural and political setting. They are transmitted on a daily basis through the language and practices of politicians, healthcare professionals, the media, and "everyday" citizens. In contemporary society, race and ethnicity are permanently linked to issues of nationalism and culture, to ideas about political and economic systems, and to beliefs about blood and ancestry. In today's world of relational conflicts, race and ethnicity are continuously being produced as explanations for why group X is annihilating group Y, and why group Z is known to be *lazy*, or *alcoholic* or any number of other assorted uncomplimentary adjectives.

Race, however, does not exist as a natural and biologic category, but, as Guillaumin argues, "it does kill people. It also continues to provide the backbone of some ferocious systems of domination."^{3(p362)} It will not work, therefore, to deny the existence of a construct that has real consequences to real people. As Bannerji notes,

I don't think it is sufficiently understood, even by us who suffer from various kinds of negative otherings, how intensively/extensively violent the experience of racism is. This violence is everywhere in a society based on "race," in the basic social organization, in the economy, in the organization of presences and absences in spaces, in the production of silences and denials, in erasing and representing. The extent of the deformations or distortions this violence produces is profound for both white and non-white people.^{15(p11)}

That is, language, used intentionally and unintentionally, is power and has consequences. Through language, we understand differences and similarities between individuals, groups, and populations. Through language, we reproduce and enforce implicit and explicit racial superiority and Othering of already marginal groups and populations.^{14(px)} Deconstructing cultural language, like language reproduced in nursing and other health science literature, shows that there is literally no evading "racially inflected language."^{14(p13)}

Awareness of the language of race is a first step in raising consciousness about the effects of language that we may take for granted as being neutral. This awareness must be an aspect of everyday critical approaches in nursing research, education, and practice. Bringing race visibly into being makes evident how the language we inherit and use shapes our understandings of the world and of our relationships with each other. This is important, necessary, and everyday work of living consciously as nurses and as global citizens in the 21st century.

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