

The violence of words

The conditions, construction
and consequences of
racist public discourse within a
racialized social system

Monetta Bailey

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Critical Perspectives on Social Science



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Monetta Bailey's The Violence of Words: The conditions, construction and consequences of racist public discourse within a racialized social system is a timely and theoretically sophisticated intervention into one of the most pressing issues confronting contemporary pluralist societies: the relationship between discourse, power, and harm. Drawing on the complementary insights of Critical Race Theory and the sociology of knowledge, Bailey offers a compelling account of how racist public discourse is not merely expressive but constitutive—shaping identities, structuring social relations, and reproducing racialized hierarchies within what she convincingly conceptualizes as a “racialized social system.”

What distinguishes this work is its ability to bridge the often-separated domains of theory and lived experience. Through a careful integration of discourse analysis and empirical data—including focus groups and counter-narratives—Bailey demonstrates that the harms of racist speech extend beyond the material into the psychological, social, and existential realms. Her analysis of “new racism,” characterized by coded and ostensibly race-neutral language, is particularly incisive, revealing how contemporary public discourse sustains historical inequities under the guise of liberal neutrality.

Importantly, Bailey does not stop at diagnosis. She advances a bold normative argument for rethinking how harm is defined in relation to public discourse, challenging entrenched liberal assumptions about the primacy of unfettered freedom of expression. In doing so, she contributes meaningfully to ongoing debates in Canada and beyond about the limits of speech, the responsibilities of the state, and the conditions necessary for genuine equality and human dignity.

This is an important and courageous book. It will be of significant interest to scholars of sociology, critical race studies, political theory, and communication, as well as to policymakers grappling with the regulation of harmful speech in democratic societies. Bailey's work is a valuable addition to the growing body of scholarship that insists we take seriously the power of words—not only to reflect the world, but to shape it.

Dr. W. Andy Knight
Distinguished University Professor
Provost Fellow, Black Excellence and Leadership
University of Alberta

Dr. Bailey used her book to highlight the racist discourse that impacts our communities and society in Canada. This book is timely and needed in higher education to discuss that words matter. In 10 chapters, it highlighted the impact of words through the stories of participants who shared their lived experiences. I cannot imagine how challenging yet beneficial it was for participants to share their realities. I have no doubt that this book will be read widely, contested, yet tell the truth about the violence of words and the trauma that individuals endure. So many lessons to take from the pages that are academically and socially powerful.

Prof. Dr. Marva J. Ferguson
Department of Child Studies and Social Work
Mount Royal University

This timely and thought-provoking book challenges dominant narratives about race and multiculturalism in Canada, compelling readers to examine how language both reflects and reproduces racial inequality. It reminds us that language is never neutral and invites us to rethink how we speak about race. An important contribution to conversations about racism, discourse and social justice, Bailey invites critical reflection on the power of words in shaping a more equitable society.

Prof. Dr. Monica Pauls
Chair, Department of Child Studies and Social Work
Mount Royal University

Dedication

I dedicate this book to my parents, Velda and Anthony. I am grateful for the voice they gave me and the belief that I could positively contribute to the world.

To Jaheem and Kaiden, I hope that my work helps create positive changes in the world you will inherit and navigate. Peace and love!

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Section 1: Introduction

In recent years, discussions around race and racism have infiltrated the public realm. Most notably after 2020, individuals and institutions have publicly shared ideas, theories, advice or solutions about the significance of race and the problem of racism in society. This heightened attention to race has occurred in opposition to the prevailing thoughts during the 1990s and early 2000s predicting a decline in the significance of race and ethnicity in Canada where many anticipated that over time the continual implementation of Canada's multicultural policy would result in race becoming irrelevant (Fleras 2021). The belief that race would become insignificant was based on the concept that was long argued by social scientists, that race is a social construction rather than a biologically determined fact (Fleras 2017, Lopez 2006). The increasing awareness of this led to debates around the benefit of maintaining racial categories versus eliminating the concept which is often used to divide and justify harming other human beings in the form of genocide, colonization and slavery. Since race is socially constructed and not "real" in any biological sense, why bother with these categories? Those who saw what they determined to be progress in race relations surmised that humanity was taking considerable steps away from separating ourselves based on socially construed categories into a more equal way of living in a "post-racial" society (Goldberg 2015).

While some suggested that Canada was on the trajectory to live up to its multicultural reputation and become a post-racial nation, the last 10 years have seen that this has not borne out. In their 2019 book: *The Millennial Mosaic: How pluralism and choice are shaping Canadian youth and the future of Canada*, Bibby, Thiessen and Bailey found that the majority of Millennials (83%) and GenXers (78%) believed that "racial and cultural diversity is a good thing for Canada". In addition, 74% of Millennials and 68% of GenXers believed that "immigration was a good thing for Canada". Despite this, a 2016 Angus Reid Institute poll found that "most Canadians (68%) would prefer to see minorities doing more to 'fit in' to mainstream society" (Angus Reid Institute 2016). This attitude towards newcomers is significant when we consider that since the 1980s, newcomers to Canada represent racialized groups, with Statistics Canada reporting that, based on the 2021 census, 69.3% of newcomers to Canada were racialized. Looking at all newcomers since the previous census conducted in 2016, 83.0% of newcomers identified as racialized (Wang & Moreau 2022). The fact that significant parts of our population believe that immigrants should do a better job of "fitting in" reflects attitudes about the

racial and ethnic makeup of newcomers. It also suggests that race and ethnicity remain important to Canadians.

These attitudes were reflected in a 2020 Angus Reid Institute poll that revealed that approximately 1/3 of the population classified Canada as an outright racist society (Angus Reid Institute 2021). Furthermore, a 2020 Ipsos poll found that 60% of Canadians considered racism to be a serious problem, compared to a year prior when only 50% of those polled indicated the same (Ipsos 2021). It would be reasonable to assume that the increase in these numbers was in part due to the increase in awareness of racism, precipitated by an increase in public discourse on the subject, however data also support that there was an increase in racist incidents. Statistics Canada reported that Canada reached an all-time high in hate crimes directed against race and/or ethnicity, fueled by an increase in hate crimes against those from the East or Southeast Asian communities (Statistics Canada 2024). A 2023 study conducted by Angus Reid Institute in partnership with the Canadian Race Relations Foundation found that close to half (48%) of Asian Canadians reported negative interactions with others based on political rhetoric, with 20% indicating multiple and regular incidents. The report noted that 77% (over three quarters) of Asian Canadians view anti-Asian discrimination as more than a minor problem, compared to 80% of respondents in 2021, shortly after the discourse around Covid-19 (Angus Reid Institute 2023). However, this was not the only driver for the increase in hate crimes; increases were also reported against Black and Indigenous People (Wang & Moreau 2022). It is noticeable that alongside these increases was the increased discourse around Black Lives Matter (BLM), and the increasing profile of Indigenous rights with the revelation of the unmarked graves of Indigenous children who were forced into residential schools. Evidence linking racist populist rhetoric and the increase in racism suggests that overall, increasing racist rhetoric is linked to increases in racist actions in society (Barnett 2017; Schaffner, Macwilliams & Nteta 2018, Bailey 2024, Elias 2024, Moran 2024). Hence it is not surprising that Canada experienced a rise in racist incidents given the global increase in racist discourse. However, the full scope of the impact of racist discourse and hateful expressions has not been fully investigated in Canada. Furthermore, we have little evidence about the impact of these heightened expressions of racism on the actions of racialized Canadians.

In 2019, the Environics Institute for Survey Research and the Canadian Race Relations Foundation conducted one of the most comprehensive studies on race and racism in Canada. Pertinent to this book are findings that, while there was overall agreement that the state of race relations in Canada is generally good (71%), different groups expressed varying levels of positive attitudes towards Canadian race relations. Most notably, while 77% of Chinese and 81%

of South Asian Canadians were more likely to view Canada's race relations as good, only 56% of Indigenous People expressed the same sentiment with 72% of Black Canadians agreeing with the statement. However, considerable differences in the experiences of diverse racialized Canadians was also evident. For example, in response to the question "It is easy to understand the anger of [group] in Canada", First Nations and Black Canadians were more likely to understand why racialized groups, on the whole, were angry. Likewise, in response to the question "Discrimination against [group] is no longer a problem in Canada", respondents of all races were more likely to respond in the affirmative for Chinese Canadians (63%) and South Asian Canadian (54%); while they were split in their response for Black Canadians (47% in affirmative and 47% in opposition) and disagreed with the statement for Indigenous Canadians (70% in disagreement). In response to the question "Racial discrimination is the main reason [group] cannot get ahead these days", roughly one in three strongly (7%) or somewhat (26%) agreed with that statement while about half somewhat (27%) or strongly disagreed (23%) with the statement. Not surprisingly, this was seen to affect Indigenous and Black Canadians more so than Chinese Canadians. In addition, agreement was more likely to come from Indigenous and Black Canadians (Neuman 2019).

Differences between the level of acceptance of various groups into the Canadian fabric was also reflected in an Angus Reid Institute study in 2021 which showed that while between 10%-15% of respondents indicated "cold/more cold than warm" feelings to Blacks (8%), Chinese or other East Asians (11%) and South Asian (13%) groups, this percent increased to 25% of Canadians expressing "cold/more cold than warm" feelings towards Muslims. In terms of the respondents' feelings toward those who experience racism, Black Canadians (50%) and South Asians (33%) were among those who were more likely to agree that Indigenous People experience a high frequency of racism. Similarly, Chinese, South Asian, Indigenous and other racialized Canadians (32%) were likely to agree that Black Canadians experience a high frequency of racism. However, few Canadians from any racialized group believed that Chinese Canadians experience a high frequency of discrimination. This finding relates to findings surrounding expressions of "modern racism", defined as prejudice that is "a more contemporary and subtle form of racism that focuses on racialized people as a group rather than as individuals" (Angus Reid Institute 2021, 20). This reflects a type of essentialism, which will be discussed later in this book. In terms of expressions of "modern racism", Canadians believe that Indigenous and Black Canadians are more likely to be impacted by modern racism, while Chinese and South Asians are less likely. In addition, Black Canadians are more likely to recognize racism expressed towards other racialized groups than others in Canada (Angus Reid Institute 2021).

The perception that Chinese and other Asian Canadians do not experience high levels of discrimination or racism cannot be ignored; this was felt by both those within and outside of these groups. However, in light of discourses surrounding COVID-19, incidents of anti-Asian hate have increased. It is reasonable to expect different results if the Environics survey was conducted today. The Canadian Census conducted in 2021 revealed the highest reported number of police-reported hate crimes against East/Southeast Asian and South Asian populations in Canada. In attempts to gain a broader picture of this increase, Statistics Canada investigated the perceptions of safety as marked by an increase in the “frequency of harassment or attacks based on race, ethnicity or skin color” (Statistics Canada 2021, 16). Findings revealed an increase of three times among racialized people, when compared to whites, marked by increases among Chinese, Korean, and Southeast Asian participants. This supports the idea that racist rhetoric not only influences expressions of hate but also affects the lived experiences of racialized individuals.

Taken together, these findings reveal that racism is not an anomaly in Canada. It is therefore necessary to investigate what discourses exist alongside the commonly accepted discourse of multiculturalism in Canada, and the impact these competing discourses have on racialized Canadians. This book tackles these issues by first, challenging the idea that multiculturalism is the singular dominant ideology on race in Canada; rather, I suggest that multiculturalism exists in tension with the fact that Canada is a racialized society with a racialized social system. In addition, the findings section of this book provides a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse of race relations provided by the voices of diverse racialized individuals. Finally, I propose that the racialized social system is maintained through racist ideologies and racialized knowledge that are kept alive through discourse. Therefore, if we are to move towards the end of racial stratification, we must pay attention to all of the social structures that maintain a system of racial stratification. Often, this social system is considered solely in terms of material or tangible structures. However, I suggest that discourse is also a social structure that governs social actions and interactions since discourse transmits knowledge about others. Thus, if we are to remedy the racialized social system, we must pay due attention to both the material and non-material forms of culture that support this system.

This book's focus

This book lays out the conditions, construction and consequences of racist public discourse using various data sources to open up discussions of its impact. The premise of this discussion is to acknowledge the ways that racist public discourse forwards an ideology that permits racialized marginalization

within a racialized social system. Not only does this create harm to racialized groups, but it harms individuals in the development of both self and social identity. The discussion of the harm caused by racist public discourse is unique given the place of race in both individual and social identity formation. This book presents focus group data to demonstrate some of the ways racialized people are affected by this discourse, highlighting the fact that, in Canada, the refusal to have open discussions of race intensifies the harm individuals experience. Responding to the need to have a conversation about the full impact of racist rhetoric on racialized people's lives, this book addresses this topic in four main sections. First, it provides a common definition of the terms racism and racist public discourse. To define racist speech, we must move beyond the common, everyday understandings of racism, which miss its true impact resulting in the maintenance of racist structures. Using arguments put forth by sociologists and critical race theorists, I present a case for what constitutes racism within a racialized social system where discourse is used as a structure to maintain this system. I then move on to a definition of public discourse highlighting the intersection of discourse and the formation of knowledge with an examination of discourse, power and the social construction of knowledge including a discussion of the use of symbolic power in the creation of the knowledge, which ultimately influences public discourse.

Section 2 reflects on the social living conditions that interact with racist public discourse, using a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective. This section provides an overview of the origins of racist discourse and the use of such discourse in society. I then discuss the differences between the realist and idealist perspectives on racism, arguing that an understanding of racism and racist public discourse requires that we pay attention to both the material existence of racialized people as well as the way we speak about race in society. Section 3 delves into an application of the social construction of racist discourse based on the discussion of the social construction of social problems. This discussion brings into focus the need to combine both a materialist and an idealist understanding of racism as it argues that racism harms beyond one's material existence, including harms to identity, belonging, dignity and existence. To demonstrate the need to look at both the process and the context of the social construction of racist speech in the examination of its harm, I use empirical evidence from a critical race discourse analysis conducted on political discourses on race and immigration to demonstrate how racist public discourse makes claims about racialized individuals. Finally, in Section 4, I analyze evidence gathered through primary research conducted with focus groups and interviews to demonstrate the many ways in which public discourse has shaped the lives of racialized people, including material ways, but also beyond. Given that racist public discourse is rooted in a racialized social system, the evidence provided in Section 4 of this book takes a broader look at the impact

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Appendix 1

Respondents

Name	Racial identity
Latoya	Black female
Martin	Black male
Kofi	Black male
Michelle	Black female
Eva	Asian female
Mia	Asian female
Ali	Bi-racial female: Asian and white
Khalid	Muslim Black male
Aisha	Bi-racial female: Asian and Black
Melissa	Black female
Olivia	Latina female
Lydia	Asian female
Cheryl	Black female
Kenan	Black male
LaKinda	Black female
Aaliyah	Black female
Angela	Black female
Rachel	Black female
Destiny	Bi-racial female: Asian and Black
Angelo	Asian male
Nikko	Asian male: South and East Asian
Imani	Black female
Jasmine	Asian female
Maria	Asian female
Serena	Black female
Aaron	Black male
Eden	Black female
Malika	Black female
Alexis	Black female
Sophie	Black female
Catherine	Black female

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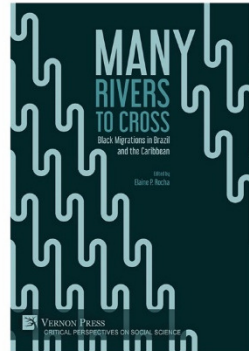
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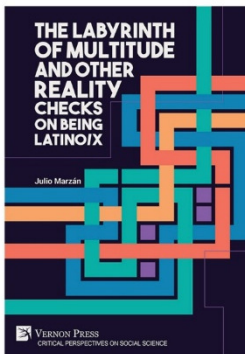
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