

TORONTO STAR

Why do anti-racist ads challenge white mindsets and not others?: Opinion

For an anti-racism ad to be effective, it would have people in divided camps talking to each other rather than talking among themselves.

By Shree Paradkar
June 20, 2016

“Where are you from?” is a common enough question in multiracial Toronto. “Where are you really from?” is the common enough subtext directed at minorities. As a relatively recent immigrant, this doesn’t offend me. I did come from somewhere else. This country is a beloved home as is my country of origin. For second-generation and older minority immigrants, however, I can see why that can be offensive.

“Go back to where you’ve come from” is the other insult directed at minorities that drives home the flawed idea that the default Canadian is Anglo-Saxon. It supposes that everybody else, including our First Nations, is the unwelcome “other” who doesn’t have modern Canada’s best interests at heart.

And so a recent [Toronto city-sponsored anti-racism ad](#) takes this statement head on. In a poster a young white man says that to a hijabi, to which she retorts, “Where. To North York?” It’s an accurate depiction of a frequent occurrence but it doesn’t tell the whole story.

The Toronto ad was made in partnership with OCASI, an agency that helps immigrants. About 150 ads were placed on bus shelters last week and the campaign will run until July 10. Perhaps they will depict more races and more examples. If they don’t, they could simply be polarizing.

Anti-racists erroneously assume everyone understands why — at the moment at least — any talk on racism predominantly challenges the white mindset. In reality, if you fed that poster to a program that cycled through various racial or ethno-religious backgrounds for both people, and came up with, say, an Asian on the left and a black person, or a Hindu on the left and a Muslim, or an immigrant of 20 years on the left and a new immigrant of

the same country, the “Go back to where you’ve come from” sentiment would still be accurate.

So why focus on whites? While racism, xenophobia, homophobia and sexism exist in all cultures, they are most harmful when they come from a dominant group or a “ruling class,” which in Canada is obviously white and male.

These are the people who construct systems and govern institutions that determine equality and social justice. They create organizational structures and offer jobs. These are the interpreters of the law. If they are themselves afflicted by the “otherness” syndrome, then their views translate into severe injustices in a diverse society.

Eventually, though, if we get the diverse leadership in political and corporate governance we talk so much about, then narrow-minded attitudes in any leader — not just a white male — would be just as harmful.

In the U.S., I see conversations on racism reduced to a binary — white vs. black. That creates divisions; non-black minorities feel marginalized, blacks feel their legitimate historical and contemporary grievances need to be dealt with first, and many whites feel anti-racism is just politically correct hocus-pocus.

Canada has to champion a more nuanced conversation on discrimination. A poster like this would speak volumes to the people affected by xenophobia. I can’t imagine it would change people who say things such as, “Go back to where you came from.” It could also estrange younger white men who might feel they’re not even given a chance to be fair. These are people in their intellectually formative years who are also exposed to the aggressive rhetoric of the aggrieved far-right, who sees themselves as victimized.

Reservations against this alienation are not about catering to white desire for, and comfort with, the status quo. It’s about reaching out to people who don’t experience racism and therefore don’t think of it as real or harmful.

“The overarching long-term goal is to create a Toronto that says ‘No’ to all forms of discrimination and racism,” the OCASI says in its media release. Saying no is the easy part.

Bullheaded bigots may be unreachable, but making meaningful strides will mean making the regular white Joe and Jane see from the non-white perspective how their circumstance, whatever it is, still benefited from a privilege not available to others. That won’t happen when divided camps are left talking within themselves.