

Introduction

Whose Canada Is It? Immigrant Women, Women of Colour and Feminist Critiques of "Multiculturalism"

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Nation-building, the privilege of a few, is a process of inclusion and exclusion, of distinguishing between "us" and "them," of conferring rights of citizenship to some but not "others." As a white settler society, Canada's so-called "rise" from "colony" to "nation" was predicated upon the colonial displacement and genocide of the First Nations. Furthermore, neo-colonial relations between white and aboriginal peoples, as well as racist, class delineated, and heterosexist paradigms, continue to define mainstream and malestream definitions of Canada and Canadian. In the highly-charged and vastly inequitable "game" of "who gets to be a Canadian?" white Canadians, especially but not exclusively bourgeois men from dominant majority races, enjoy tremendous though not entirely uncontested privilege. Moreover, those most severely handicapped by the pernicious "rules" of this high-stakes game, such as migrant women of colour on temporary work visas, experience most directly the harsh hypocrisy of liberal democracies that promise opportunity and freedom to everyone while simultaneously creating categories of unfree workers.

While right-wing critics of "multiculturalism" vent their anger against imagined enemies for stealing "their" society and certain privileged white male leftists in the academy attack anti-racist feminists for allegedly derailing the class project, liberal-minded Canadians, including politicians, ethnic elites, and social

scientists, proudly proclaim Canada as a "nation of immigrants" that offers hardworking newcomers an opportunity to improve themselves, contribute to Canada's rich cultural "mosaic," and eventually join the Canadian "family." None of these viewpoints capture the truly invidious features of Canadian nation-building or official multiculturalism. In posing the question "Whose Canada Is It?" we hoped that this volume would contribute to ongoing efforts to expose and critique the racism and sexism at the heart of exclusionary admission and citizenship requirements and attacks (from the right but also male left) against both immigrants and refugees of colour and feminist anti-racist activists. We also wanted to lay bare the falsehood of liberal notions of Canada as a place where everyone can be both "different" and "equal."

Here we highlight some key themes in this volume, especially that of challenging the dominant liberal construction of Canada as a model immigrant country. Though often portrayed as progressive thinking, an ideology of liberal pluralism erases the fact that Canadian immigration and refugee policy, like its citizenship laws and requirements, have been characterised by exclusionary and discriminatory practises with regard to people of colour and ethnic minorities, women, and gays and lesbians. The emphasis in many essays on debunking liberal narrations of the Canadian nation-state is not surprising given the predominance in Canada of liberal discourses of immigration and nation. Within this liberal

framework, graphic instances of racism or discrimination - such as the Komagata Maru affair, the "evacuation" of Japanese-Canadians during World War Two, and the Chinese head-taxes - are presented as blips in an otherwise smooth and linear development towards nation-hood and social progress. Liberal readings of present-day multiculturalism policies and programs also make invisible the ways in which state policy and funding formulas - including those aimed at immigrant/women of colour - offer platitudes to so-called "visible minorities" while denying people of colour, especially women, genuine access to power and resources. It is not enough to simply acknowledge "difference," and worse yet to offer up empty slogans about "national unity in diversity." We must continue to recognise, scrutinise, and challenge the power relations that serve to privilege white Canadians at the expense of people of colour, migrant workers, and refugees. Feminist, class-oriented, and anti-racist perspectives must be central to our intellectual and political struggles to unsettle, indeed subvert, dominant class-based, racist, sexist, and heterosexist definitions of "Canada" and "Canadian."

Race relations in Canada, as elsewhere, reflect the impact throughout the globe of continuing systems of neo-colonialism and imperialism. The asymmetrical relations between "rich" and "poor," or North and South, create in various countries and regions a political economy that in turn produces the conditions that compel people to move from one part of the globe to another. Hardly random events, this migration of human beings is reaching enormous proportions and is most dramatic in the case of the massive movement of peoples from Southern nations to Northern ones. Even the comparatively smaller movement of people from Rich to Poor states is a reflection of the same forces - including capital restructuring at a global level and the increasing preoccupation of citizens in Northern countries with the "policing" of their borders. While people are on the move in larger numbers than ever before, they are moving not as equals but as dis-empowered peoples forced to sell their labour in highly

exploitative contexts. Women, especially migrant women slotted into the most detested "dead-end" jobs, denied basic human rights, and made to feel less than human, feature prominently among these pools of cheap non-citizen workers.

All this underscores the importance of developing critical analyses and political strategies at the local, national and international level. To this end, our contributors offer us much food for thought and action. As some authors explain, we cannot restrict feminist organising to winning citizenship rights precisely because such rights as defined by nation-states necessarily require that certain "others" be identified as non-citizens. The latter are thus not entitled to the basic rights that many mainstream Canadians, and even established white ethnic immigrants and their children, take for granted. When people do migrate from the South to the North, the receiving Northern countries invariably cast themselves into the missionary role as saviour to the dispossessed and oppressed. And yet, as with certain countries in Latin America, Canada shares responsibility for permitting certain military dictatorships or other authoritarian regimes to consolidate their power and is thus implicated in creating the very oppressions that produce refugees for Canada. Unfortunately, simplistic notions of North and South also emerge among some leftists, who accept uncritically the dichotomy between "bad" Northern capitalist countries and more progressive or "good" Southern states. Without ignoring the role that rabid anti-Communism played in Canada's reluctance to admit Latin American political refugees from dictatorships, we must also develop more critical analyses of who and how certain interests in the South benefit from authoritarian regimes.

The contributions in this special issue address critical themes in various ways. Some articles are historical in approach, mapping, for instance, the gendered fears of Canadians about the supposed in-born criminality and sexual deviance of post-World War Two refugees, Caribbean domestics and other migrant workers of colour who were/are not only denied landed immigrant status but were/are not even allowed to apply, and Black women activists involved in community organizing.

Other papers deal with contemporary realities, including immigrant women's organizations and their continuing struggles with the state, the recent rise in anti-immigrant and refugee sentiment in Canada and beyond, and white Canadians' fears of the non-white population soon outnumbering and possibly even "taking over" their society. While half-baked conspiracy theories that fuel racism must be dismissed, we should recognize that fears about non-whites reaching more than 50 percent of the population in Toronto (and later, elsewhere) are deep-rooted and based on some recognition that dominant definitions of Canada and Canadian will indeed be seriously challenged. This is not to suggest that new definitions and power relations will easily replace traditional ones. The hegemonic power of conventional constructions of Canada and Canadian is well demonstrated, for instance, by the ambiguities and contradictions articulated and experienced by present-day immigrant school girls and Canadian-born children of colour who feel "othered" - who see themselves as existing outside the boundaries of "white blonde" Canadian womanhood. Transforming power relations and race ideology is more than a numbers game, but we are heartened by the possibility that there can indeed be powers in numbers, especially when working-class people, sexual and racial minorities and women mobilize for social change. The rising proportion of people of colour in certain cities holds the possibility of organizing a mass movement directed at remaking the Canadian nation.

Developments within Canada must also be seen within a global context of growing heterosexist and racist exclusion as well as the recent surge of migrant workers, increasingly women, around the world. Relevant essays underscore the importance of "racing" and "gendering" our critiques of capitalism and varied forms of female oppression. They also point to the need for greater understanding among Canadian and other western feminists of the plight and struggles of women in non-western societies. Some writers offer incisive and moving accounts of their own experiences as women and left feminist academics of colour from Southern nations who

straddle the contradictory worlds of privileged academia in Canada and critics of female oppressions in their homeland. As active teachers and scholars, women of colour professors also find themselves in the problematic position of being celebrated (particularly by liberal Canadians) as examples of success and "model" New Canadians - putting yet another spin on the age-old liberal notion of one being "a credit to one's race." Their writings speak eloquently to the contradictions and ambiguities that derive from their position; inclusion within elite institutions such as the university does not eliminate their continuing marginality both inside and outside those arenas and at the same time creates the ever-present possibility of becoming "co-opted" by a system that both reflects and replicates class, race, gender and other forms of systemic discrimination.

The contributions here of aboriginal and women of colour academics well capture these kinds of ongoing tensions, and also their continuing struggles amid a "chilly climate" to challenge and change things from the front-lines of classroom teaching to university-wide structures of decision-making. As their efforts suggest, real change is not solely a matter of inclusion into Canadian institutions but of fundamentally redistributing power and resources. The mere act of including individuals or groups in a system that is classist, racist, and heterosexist will not eliminate or even reduce the structural inequalities that divide Canadians and human beings around the world. The problem of exclusion cannot be accommodated within institutions that reflect and replicate systems of oppression and discrimination.

In putting this issue together, we had first-hand experience with the complex ways in which exclusion operates within feminist efforts inside academia. When we initially accepted the invitation from the *Atlantis* Panel to be guest editors of a volume devoted to what was described in short-hand as the "multiculturalism" issue, we accepted the mandate, which also included putting together a guest editorial collective that would include at least one aboriginal woman, one woman of colour, and one woman from Quebec. Even though our expertise is in the area of immigrant

women and women of colour, we also agreed that by enlisting contributions from as wide a range of women as possible our volume could offer analyses that were both inclusive of and including aboriginal women, immigrant women, and women of colour operating in a nation-state officially described as a bilingual but multicultural country. We wrongly assumed that one volume could in some way adequately reflect or represent all marginalised women *vis à vis* the question of nationalism and nation-building. In subsequent discussions and debates with feminist colleagues, we became acutely aware of the dangers of tokenism. How could one issue of a journal offer comprehensive coverage? Put more bluntly, how many articles on one given group is required to avoid the charge of tokenism - more than one? two, three? Did we not risk falling into the trap of liberal pluralism, of assuming that by virtue of including at least one contribution by someone "belonging" to every group defined in our mandate, we would have fulfilled our aims? Does that not erroneously assume that all contributions would necessarily be of equal value and importance?

It was indeed naïve to think that we could have achieved some kind of "balance" between different struggles and do justice to them all. At one point, for instance, we were challenged to decide whether we were prepared to prioritize First Nations' struggles for self-determination, but felt inadequate to meet the challenge. How could we become "expert" on aboriginal women, or convince aboriginal scholars and activists to trust us with their submissions? Did it make better sense for us to concentrate on our expertise and draw on our intellectual and political networks - and at the same time make a strong case for the need to devote at least one entire issue of *Atlantis* to, about, and by aboriginal women? Our own discomfort with centring aboriginal woman's struggles in the "multiculturalism" issue we had agreed to guest edit emanated from our respective social location as racialized/ethnicized women from immigrant backgrounds, and in that sense we too easily gave in to a politics of identity. By not taking a stand on the question of comparing nationalisms in Canada, we inadvertently subscribed to the dominant

discourse shaped around multiculturalism in Canada, one that by virtue of the dual founding nations myth, marginalises First Nations people. We are clear now that we cannot deal with all nationalisms as though they are at all times and in all circumstances equal movements - because they are not. Whatever our politics or position, we must recognize that nationalism for English Canada or Quebec, or inclusion for immigrants and refugees into the Canadian nation, is premised on the exclusion and insubordination of the First Nations. Yet, as readers will note, this volume, though largely about immigrant women and women of colour, does include important interventions by and about aboriginal women. The willingness of aboriginal anti-racist activists to contribute to our theme issue despite earlier difficulties, and the contributions themselves, underscores the critical lesson that we learned: all feminists committed to anti-racist struggles must recognize the centrality of aboriginal challenges to the Canadian colonial state, become better informed about aboriginal struggles, and actively support them.

Even a volume devoted largely to immigrant women and women of colour can hardly be comprehensive or definitive. As noted earlier, we see this volume as part of ongoing debates and struggles. We hope that *Atlantis* will continue the debate over "Whose Canada Is It?" by devoting subsequent issues to aboriginal struggles and their right to self-determination. Future issues could also address other critical themes insufficiently explored in this volume, such as discrimination in immigration policy against lesbians and gays, the marginalisation of lesbian immigrant women and women of colour in hetero-normative discourses, and Quebec feminism and nationalism.

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