MULTICULTURAL COLONIALISM[1]

Rita Kaur Dhamoon is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Victoria. Her research interests have centred on issues of identity/difference politics and power, including multiculturalism, culture, nation-building, gender politics and feminism, intersectionality, critical race studies, and post-colonial and anti-colonial politics. As well as journal articles and book chapters, she has published a book called Identity/Difference Politics: How Difference is Produced and Why it Matters (UBC Press, 2009).

How does one reflect on the 50th anniversary of Canada's multiculturalism policy in the current context of various racisms and colonialisms? So many of us are consumed by ongoing anxieties about another wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially as Black people, people of colour and Indigenous peoples are labouring on the front lines to ensure the health and food security of the nation. Many are also devastated by the news of hundreds of unmarked graves of Indigenous children taken from their families and forcibly sent to Indian Residential Schools. Furthermore, it is a time of heightened collective grief and rage about ongoing state sanctioned violence against Black and Indigenous people murdered by police. This is happening while Muslims/Arabs, undocumented people of colour, Brown international students, and temporary foreign migrants from the so-called global south continue to be subject to technologies of the Canadian and global war on terror.

It is also a time, as it has been in the past, when Indigenous communities are fighting back against more resource extraction and corporate development on their territories (think of Wet'suwet'en, Land Back, Mi'kmaq fisherman, Fairy Creek). It is also a time when Black Lives Matter has put police abolition on the public agenda, and Black, Black-Muslim, and Black-Indigenous people continue to decentre the State through their activism (e.g., creating their own Wildseed Centre for Art and Activism in Toronto); and when anti-Asian racism is being addressed by Asian communities by foregrounding those most vulnerable, including sex workers and the working poor; and when communities of colour and Indigenous communities keep standing with each other, across issues, across this Turtle Island.

In this context, how do I, as a Punjabi-Sikh Brown woman who is deemed a subject of multiculturalism, make sense of even writing a piece to mark the 50th anniversary of Canada's multicultural policy? Was I invited to write a piece because my previous work (over 12 years ago) was on multiculturalism, even though I fundamentally critiqued multiculturalism? I can see that my critique of liberal multicultural conceptions of culture (Dhamoon 2009) remains relevant today, wherein culture becomes narrowly about ethnic/ethno-religious and linguistic minority cultures rather than the problem of authority and rule by dominant majorities, and where culture is treated as a bounded entity, a pre-social identity, a resource that has both individual instrumental value and economic value, a

1 My thanks to Davina Bhandar for the conversation on the state of multiculturalism.

mode of Othering, a proxy for race, a unidimensional (rather than intersecting) signifier of difference, and a site of regulation by State agents.

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Under the weight of racism and colonialism, and uncertainty about how my Brown ethnic body is being put under the service of multiculturalism, I search the political scientist within me and find myself seeking evidence of what I *feel*. I feel that the Canadian State has failed my communities, that it could never address structural inequities because it is constituted by genocide, dispossession, violence, slavery, and exploitation. I can feel this in my body because multiculturalism has become largely irrelevant to me and my communities. Except now, in writing this piece, I feel the pounding in my head, and "multi-culti" fervour stuck in my throat.

My political science training propelled me to review the annual reports (about 35 reports) on the "Operation of the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act*" (the Act was passed in 1998). These were presented by the various ministries responsible for the multiculturalism portfolio, which shifted over time from the Minister of State (Multiculturalism and Citizenship), the Department of Canadian Heritage, Canadian Heritage and Status of Women as well as the Secretary of State of Multiculturalism and Canadian Identity, Citizenship and Immigration Canada/Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, Canadian Heritage again, Canadian Heritage and Multiculturalism, and now Diversity and Inclusion and Youth. The shifts in ministries are indicative of the changing priority of multicultural policy for Conservative and Liberal governments, and reflect the changing goals of the multiculturalism policy.

A review of the annual reports also highlights several key features of multiculturalism that remain unchanged, even as specific goals and program activities have shifted over 50 years. First, most reports claim in some way or another that Canada has always been multicultural, effectively erasing the genocidal politic against Indigenous peoples that made Canada possible. Second, while the Act itself makes specific mention that its mandate does not cover institutions of the legislative assemblies or governments of Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut – which are largely populated by Indigenous peoples – or any Indian Band or Band Council, many of the activities funded under the multiculturalism policy are for Indigenous communities, as if they are another ethnic group rather than First Peoples whose sovereignty is threatened by state-led multiculturalism. Third, while various antiracism activities have been well funded under the multiculturalism policy for a host of different ethnic cultural, religious and Indigenous groups, for the most part these are ad hoc or short-term projects. Certainly, issues of racism and discrimination are named in every report, but the goal is not to make structural and systemic change, but rather to produce short-term project support. Canada's national antiracism strategy, the Canadian Action Plan Against Racism (CAPAR), was only introduced in 2005 but appears in the reports since then; while relatively dormant under the Conservative government and better funded under the Liberal government, multiculturalism and antiracism continue to be conflated. Fourth, multicultural policy has always encompassed an economic, and increasingly a neoliberal, dimension. While initially the focus was on employment opportunities for minorities, this has shifted towards "selling diversity" (Abu-Laban and Gabriel 2002) and evaluating what multicultural subjects can bring to Canada's economy.

Fifth, multicultural policy operates along a spectrum of diversity and unity, regardless of the political party in power. This is most commonly articulated in the requirement that "multicultural minorities" should be expected to learn at least one of the two languages of Canada – namely French or English (no mention of Indigenous languages). In other words, multiculturalism is always scripted through the European dominance of the English and French, who continue to vie for ongoing colonial control (Bannerji 1996). Indeed, Trudeau Snr. introduced the multicultural policy in 1971 to mute Quebecois nationalism by incorporating the demands of Japanese and Ukrainian Canadians who were, at the time, concerned about their place in English and French Canada. As prominently noted in the first few reports, the future of Quebec was a point of contention that concerned those committed to the multicultural policy, especially while constitutional debates and Quebec's possible separation from Canada preoccupied the country.

Québécois anxiety has not gone away, for as recent as September 2020 a private member's bill (C-226) was introduced to Parliament so as not to apply the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* in Québec on the basis that:

> "Multiculturalism undermines Quebec's distinctiveness and reduces it to one ethnic group among many. It undermines the existence of a common culture. Multiculturalism undermines Quebec's very existence as a nation."

While Bill C-226 was ultimately defeated, the insistence on bilingualism remains. This was evident in July 2021, when Canada's official languages watchdog opened an investigation after receiving more than 400 complaints within two weeks concerning the appointment of non-French-speaking and the first Indigenous (Inuk) Governor General of Canada, Mary Simon/Ningiukudluk. Many of these complaints were

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racist and hostile and reinscribed the dominance of English and French as the required "unifying" components of multicultural Canada. The racism against Simon also illuminates the normalized idea that Canadian sovereignty exists de facto, such that the question of returning land and governing authority back to Indigenous peoples is never on the table. Put differently, the nationalist demand for bilingualism provides evidence that multiculturalism is a technology of settler colonialism.

Multiculturalism is deployed to extend whitewashed nationalist narratives about a now reformed nation and mask over ongoing colonialism. The annual reports reveal specific discourses by which multiculturalism is operationalized as a ruling colonial technology. In the reports from the 1980s and 1990s, multiculturalism is articulated through the language of "diversity", "inclusion", and "pluralism" in order to celebrate minority cultures, manage minorities and present strategies of integration of "minorities" into the settler colonial nation that is structured through French and English domination. These values are consistent with liberalism, in which activities focus on increasing participation of ethnocultural communities, intercultural exchanges, human rights, creating equal opportunities for employment, and linking cross-cultural understanding to citizenship. The activities noted in the reports reflect a multicultural era of "saris, samosas, and songs", in which more substantive changes (such as establishing the Canadian Race Relations Foundation in 1997) are domesticated via surface celebration of Othered cultures. Importantly, while in the 1980s and 1990s the creative arts fared well under "song and dance multiculturalism", some have lamented that the arts became less central by the 2000s in favour of other activities geared towards "inclusive citizenship" (Moss 2011).

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The annual reports show that the 2000s were shaped by nationalist concerns about security and terrorism, no doubt as a result of the attacks on the US on September 11, 2001. While religion really wasn't a focus before, it became a central focus of multicultural policy during this decade because of (racist) anxieties about Islam. The multicultural program continued to advocate for civic participation and shared citizenship, as well as projects that addressed hate and bias, but through the lens of terrorism. Consequently, the multicultural portfolio was openly used to regulate and scrutinize non-western non-white religions. Multiple reports refer to cross-religious (and not just cultural) understanding, faith group meetings on the role of religion, programs to address so-called religious youth radicalization, and cross-cultural roundtables on security in collaboration with the ministries of Public Safety and Justice to advise the government on how best to secure the nation against Islamic (and to a lesser extent Sikh) terrorism. Now subjects of multiculturalism were being deployed to meet the security needs of the white nation.

The annual reports covering the 2000s and leading into the 2010s continued to narrate the idea that past racist policies and laws had been replaced, and that Canada was now more progressively multicultural. These were the decades of recognition politics, in which apologies and commemorations were rife. The reports are strewn with apologies to Japanese, Chinese, Italian, South Asian, and more recently the Jewish communities for internment, the head tax, and racist immigration exclusion. Such recognition activities were signalled early on with the involvement of the Japanese community seeking redress of internment, and later became formalized through time-limited programs including community and historical recognition programs. As the scholarship on recognition politics has shown, often times these apologies and reparations are made with very little material and structural change in the circumstances of affected communities, and instead seek to provide closure on issues of historical racism for the nation.

Furthermore, multicultural recognition politics is symbolized through a series of dedicated calendar events, which are highlighted in the reports, including: January as Tamil Heritage Month (starting in 2016); January 27 as the international Holocaust Remembrance Day; January 29 as National Day of Remembrance of the Québec City Mosque Attack and Action Against Islamophobia (2021); February as Black History Month (1995); March as Irish heritage Month (2021); April as Sikh Heritage Month (2019); May as Asian Heritage Month (2002), Canadian Jewish Heritage Month (2018), and May 5 as Dutch Heritage Day (2019. They didn't even get a month!); June as National Indigenous History Month (2009), Italian Heritage Month (2010), Filipino Heritage Month (2018), Portuguese Heritage Month (2017), And June 27 as Canadian Multiculturalism Day (2002); the second week of September is Mennonite Heritage Week (2019); October as Latin American Heritage Month (2018), Canadian Islamic History Month (2007), German Heritage Month (2016); and the fourth Saturday of November

is now Holodomor Memorial Day (2008). While from the perspective of liberal multiculturalism these are positive recognition activities, from an antiracist perspective these are ways to merely acknowledge diversity without addressing ongoing structural racisms.

So I return to the question of how to make sense of marking 50 years of multicultural policy in the context of state domestication of racism and colonialism, and various kinds of violence that cut across time (past, continuing and future), across space (Indigenous places and colonial borders), and across the variously situated bodies of those deemed to be multicultural subjects (Indigenous people, Black people, and people of colour, who may or may not have Canadian citizenship status, possibly refugees, temporary foreign workers, permanent residents or undocumented)? So long as the issues of police violence, disproportionate rates of incarceration of Indigenous and Black peoples, detainment and detention of those deemed to be a threat to the nation (whether as a result of the war on terror or border controls), violence against BIPOC women and girls and trans and Two-Spirit and non-binary peoples, worker exploitation, corporate and government sanctioned resource extraction, illness and deaths of marginalized people arising from health inequities and poverty – so long as these issues structure the lives of so many marginalized people and remain embedded in the structures of Canadian laws (such as the criminal code, Indian Act, temporary foreign worker legislation, etc.) and institutions (such as the police, court system, Constitution of Canada) then we should expect nothing more than another 50 years of multicultural colonialism.

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