# BEING BLACK: WATCHING MULTICULTURAL CANADA GROW UP

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Cecil Foster is an author, a public intellectual and a leading academic on multiculturalism. He has published several books in fiction and non-fiction on multiculturalism and the Black and immigrant experiences in multicultural societies primarily in Canada, the United States and the Caribbean. Foster's latest book is the widely acclaimed *They Call Me George: The Untold Story of Black Train Porters and the Birth of Modern Canada* (Bibliaosis 2019). He is working on a book on the foundations of official multiculturalism in Canada and the first 50 years of Canadian Multiculturalism. Foster is a professor in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University at Buffalo and he spends his time between Greater Toronto and Buffalo.

In the first decade of official multiculturalism, I arrived in Canada to immerse myself in a modern country and amongst a people collectively struggling to know themselves and seeking to determine if together they even had a future. An unavoidable question back then was whether this Canada – especially since it was by design now multicultural – could survive long enough to last another decade, far less reach a 50th anniversary. Experience quickly showed me that in the heart of this ideologically and linguistically torn country, there was no place for a racialized person like me. I am Black, an immigrant from the Caribbean, specifically from Barbados, one of the former British possessions in the Americas that like Canada had shared a supposedly common British colonial experience. As an individual, I was proudly and firmly grounded in my culture – at home in my own skin, as it were – and had no plans to let go of the inspiration acquired out of this culture and history. Rather, I imagined Canada as a place to achieve the personal accomplishments that my culture had taught me to dream.

But in the 1970s and long after, Black people were not routinely seen on Canadian television or in Canadian movies, heard on the radio, found sitting in parliaments or as judges, claiming professorships at universities or executive positions in businesses and governments – indeed, Black people were not considered fully Canadian or entitled to such recognition. Instead, Black Canadians were beginning to disproportionately populate prisons and, for the allowable height of self-actualization, routinely did

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the manual labour in hospitals and old folks' homes, as well as in agriculture, low-skilled manufacturing and hospitality sectors. Our personal aspirations did not seem to matter, much less were they encouraged. At best, as I have argued elsewhere, we were socially marginalized with the stamp of inequality being the colour of our skin.[1]

This social positioning, based on presumed racial and cultural inferiority, inextricably informs my reflections on the first 50 years of official multiculturalism in Canada. As a mainstream journalist, a public intellectual, a recognized Canadian author for fiction and non-fiction, and as an academic, mine has been a life long struggle to surmount this social positioning. From early on, I was one of the few nonwhite Canadians to have an institutional front-row view of the emerging new Canada. My entire Canadian experience has been trying to understand official multiculturalism, as both policy and practice, as enunciated by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in 1971. I have advocated for fully implemented official multiculturalism, that would offer a special kind of redemption for all humanity – the dismantling of institutions of white supremacy and the ethnocultural state.[2] This would require that, as practice more than merely idealized policy, multiculturalism must be given a chance for actualization through full implementation of its founding principles, in order to dismantle the existing racial structures of the Canadian state. Conversely, because of my social positioning, over the past five decades I have seen Canada grow up into a promising multicultural society predicated on the respect for a common human dignity. Black and other peoples of colour are now, thankfully, making bold claims to leadership in the commanding heights of Canadian society and economy – and there is a view across the land that, indeed, their time has come and there will be no turning back. But there is still some way to go to make what is still a promise into routine social practices.

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1 Cecil Foster. *A Place Called Heaven: The Meaning of Being Black in Canada*. Toronto: HarperCollinsPublishers Ltd., 1996; *Blackness and Modernity: The Colour of Humanity and the Search for Freedom*. Kingston/Montreal: McGill- Queen's UP, 2007.

2 Cecil Foster. *Where Race Does Not Matter: The New Spirit of Modernity*. Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2005; *Genuine Multiculturalism: The Tragedy and Comedy of Diversity*. Kingston/Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2014.

At the time of my arrival, in spite of the establishment's rejections, outwardly there remained some personal relations that encouraged those of us the world over – then classified as visible minorities and now under multiculturalism as new Canadians to give the country a chance. If tolerance is at the heart of the practice of multiculturalism, we were the pioneers – for we were asked to be tolerant to the daily racism we encountered, to keep on believing and even forgiving. This was the promise of multiculturalism: that if not to our immediate benefit, then at least the assurance of a good life for all would remain an aspiration of this new society; by a Canada that includes all of our children equally and considers its own newer Canadians among the new inheritors of the land, and as contributors to its social good. From the beginning, there appeared to me a social contract joining us to the mainstream, something that was genuinely new and even historical, which encouraged us not to give up but to stand our ground, help build, and see what could happen. Long-suffering, we invested in hope and our personal aspirations.

But as a counterpoint to this optimism, particularly among the dominant intellectuals in those early days, there was a ponderous preoccupation with death. Noted philosopher, George Grant, had already drawn attention to a national demise in his famous lament over the death of the old Canadas within the British North America Act[3] – the Canadas that were separately English and French in a Balkanized confederation. Both solitudes were undoubtedly racially white and equally on the cusp of annexation by the neighbouring colossal empire to the south. It was also an elegy for the wider death of the British Empire, ironically a development that the newer Canadians – as former colonized people from the Caribbean, Asia, Africa and Latin America – viewed as a welcome liberation. The same was true as we thought about the death of the French language or any other form of colonialism grounded in stealing native lands and placing Indigenous people within the same social margins newcomers were expected to occupy. Our arrival in Canada was a result of this liberation and in it were the seeds, we thought optimistically, for the prototypical liberation of all humanity. Multicultural Canada was a social experiment to achieve social justice, even in the wake of the seeming inevitability of the death mourned by Grant but welcomed by people like me.

In this frame of mind, established and newer Canadians alike struggled over the experiment's viability.[4] Charles Taylor would analyze multiculturalism as a society within which individual groups – in Canada's case limited really to the English and French – struggle endlessly for recognition.[5] To my thinking, this was nothing more than the continuation of their historic fight for dominance. Other minority groups would achieve recognition by seeing themselves as separate units within the largely homogenous armies on either side – but in the end had the same commitment to

3 George Grant. Lament for a Nation. Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1965.

4 Cecil Foster. *Caribana: The Greatest Celebration*. Toronto: Ballantine Books, 1995; *Sleep On, Beloved*. Toronto: Random House Canada Ltd., 1995.

5 Charles Taylor. Multiculturalism: The Politics of Recognition in Amy Gutmann (ed) *Multiculturalism*: Expanded paperback Edition. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994.

the historic goals and outcomes of the established predetermined army of choice. Analogously, they might be soldiers of different ethnicities, cultures and races, but all holding the same standard, which for either side largely maintained the principles of white supremacy whether the version was French or English. A clear sign of this was that despite their diversity they had to speak either English or French to be officially recognized. Other academics like Will Kymlicka, painted multiculturalism as a search for a common citizenship,[6] a new nationality not based on ethno-culturalism as was historically the case, but which in my mind ultimately still had to fit into this supreme whiteness. Canadians would be recognized as having common citizenship rights even with different ethnic backgrounds, but ultimately as individuals all belonging to a single plural nation whose so-called founding fathers were committed to ethnoracial whiteness. As in the army, combatants might be recognized first as individuals and even mercenary soldiers – perhaps based on race, ethnicity, culture, etc.

In my opinion, on their own, neither of these theories was tapping all the potential promised by official multiculturalism. How was I – a Canadian Black person according to Taylor, or is it a Black person that is Canadian according to Kymlicka – to be situated in this new Canada, especially when I start from a position of such ingrained inequality?[7] I felt that based on the two main prongs of this thinking, whether recent or established citizens, Canadians would be building on the same old structure that had emerged from Canada's now lamented commitment to ethno-racial white conformity through assimilation or relegation of the unassimilable to the margins of society. Collectively, this thinking was simply to protect Canada from the fallout from the death Grant lamented and which immigrants of colour celebrated even to this day by physically toppling certain statues and monuments.

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For me, the answer was the order of preferences by which I simply ask to be recognized as an authentic Canadian – preferably first as an individual and then as an individual choosing to be recognized as a second, third or as many other social categories or identities as I choose. This way I could go about my personal business of building a new life in a new country but without first having to be acculturated to any established group. I found this approach useful whether as a journalist when I would first be

6 Among Kymlicka's wide-ranging *œuvre* on multiculturalism see in particular, Will Kymlicka. *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*. Oxford University Press/Clarendon Press, 2003/1996.

7 *Distorted Mirror: Canada's Racist Face*. Toronto: HarperCollinsPublishers Ltd., 1991; *They Call Me George: The Untold Story of Black Train Porters and the Birth of Modern Canada*. Biblioasis, Windsor, Ontario, Canada, 2019.

told that we have never hired Black reporters/Journalists, or as a Black and immigrant Canadian I was also told that I did not have the Canadian culture (experience) needed for this job, or as an author when I wanted my work classified as Canadian literature but from a Black (Canadian) perspective. This ordering has to be fluid and as such Canadian multicultural identities cannot be fixed permanently. The only constant, the true fixity associated with multicultural identities, has to be the way all members of the society are positioned, placed and treated – as equal Canadians. Like the iconic North Star for slaves on the Underground Railway, the dream/promise of freedom had to be fixed. This meant the inevitable death of the historic Canadian society and its internal social ordering and its replacement with a society where for a lodestar race did not matter. And, as a public intellectual and academic, I have spent most of my time explaining this ordering and approach as genuine multiculturalism – where power, belonging and entitlement start through individual recognition but that individuals can subsequently choose to be counted by ethnicity, racialization, gender, place of birth or any other social category that speaks to diversity and inclusiveness – the commitment to the intersectionalism of daily living – of multicultural Canada and its citizenship.

So, what does this all mean pragmatically in this moment of self-reflection? I think this is what matters to understanding the social evolution that is the first 50 years of multiculturalism. Analogously, multicultural Canada began life like an orphan. It had some idea of an ancestral history that especially dominant Canadians – or some of them – wanted to retain and even preserve. Truly an unhappy consciousness, it was like the modern individual uncertain of how much this heritage was preparing it for a new life on its own, that could only occur through a mythological rebirth, or of how much of this legacy was like those chains every Scrooge individually was destined to drag into the future unless there is a fundamental and honest recounting and recanting of past deeds. In the dominant Christian mythology that has always provided validation for Canadian thinking, and even underpinned the outlooks of Grant, Taylor and Kymlicka, multiculturalism is currently symbolically an empty grave. But is it the grave that for 50 years still awaits the three nations (English, French and confederated Canada) as lamented by Grant, something that it is a waste of time mourning as there is no social justice to be found in the life lamented? Or is it the gaping hole an abyss from which, based on the thinking of people like Taylor and Kymlicka, the old and decrepit body has escaped and has now emerged over five decades as a radically transformed society markedly different in demography and optimism than before its death? For half a century, Canadians have been trying to decide if they are living a nightmare or the dream. Going forward, they have to commit fully to one or the other, with the young people of the day seemingly in all their diversity firmly and proudly opting to be big dreamers and monument topplers.