IN DEFENSE OF OFFICIAL MULTICULTURALISM AND RECOGNITION OF THE NECESSITY OF CRITICAL ANTI-RACISM

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ABSTRACT

This paper is purposively provocative in its defense of official multiculturalism and the call for an anti-racist/anti-colonial reading so as to give voice to the lived experiences of racialized groups and to situate them at the center of the discussions around inclusion and belonging. It is opined that anti-racism as a discursive and political practice places the myriad forms of racism and their intersections with other forms of oppression in societal institutions on the table for discussion. Therefore, researchers, educators, policy makers, and community workers cannot shy away from an engagement with anti-racism in a spirited defense of official multiculturalism, despite the often unquestioned assumptions of citizenship and civility that underlay it. This paper asks: What does systemic oppression and resistance of the marginalized tell us about the concepts of nation, nationhood, citizenship, citizenship responsibilities, identity, and belonging? An anti-racist and anti-colonial gaze allows us to highlight the material and experiential realities of racialized groups in their dealings with the state and its social institutions (e.g. school system). It is argued that without recognition of diverse cultures, histories, identities and experiences, we [as scholars, educators and researchers] fail to create room for multiple knowledges to flourish in our educational institutions.

This paper is written to provoke a critical debate as part of the on-going contestation of ideas surrounding multiculturalism, "interculturalism", and anti-racism in Canada. In recent months, a number of Western leaders have openly questioned official policies of multiculturalism, arguing that it has failed to meet the challenges of social cohesion and good citizenship. Instead, they argue, the policy has created ethnic enclaves and communities who have stuck hard to their cultures and not adapted to the values of their new homelands. It is not at all surprising that such debates and musings will carry over and also happen in Canada. After all, we rightly pride ourselves on having a long-standing, open multiculturalism policy. I admit that I am not a big fan of multiculturalism; yet, I am hesitant to completely dismiss it as a social policy with no relevance. In Canada, the passage of Bill C-93 (an Act for the preservation and enhancement of multiculturalism) on July 12, 1988, enshrined multiculturalism into federal law. As an official political doctrine, multiculturalism has promoted cultural diversity as an intrinsic and valuable component of the social, political and moral order. The policy also seeks to value racial minorities on the basis of a common humanity and envisions a future assured by goodwill on the part of all. Thus, at the very least, the contributions of different cultures to national well-being and destiny are officially acknowledged.

Many critics would rightly argue that, despite any good intentions, official multiculturalism has been ineffective in addressing broader questions of structural racism, social oppression, domination, and marginalization of peoples in society. The policy has failed to address profound issues of power, resource sharing, and working with social identities

and its implications for knowledge construction (Price, 1993). There are profound social problems that racialized immigrant communities confront daily in Canadian society: employment, education, housing, law, and the justice system. These issues are largely connected to integration challenges for newcomers as they navigate alienation and try to fit in with a socially devalued identity. Many immigrant youth and indigenous communities face challenges of poverty, both racialized and gendered, homelessness and displacement as non-status refugees, post-traumatic stress (coming from war zones), and discrimination in the housing and social service sector that affect their sense of belonging. Attention must also be paid to the complex historical issues of indigenous lands and occupation. We need to understand these moments of oppression based on Aboriginality as deeply embedded within the contexts of racism and colonialism and, subsequently, within the fabric of Canadian society. Multiculturalism offers limiting conditions in regards to contemporary discussions about indigenous land rights and self-governance. Celebratory promotions of diversity by the state fail to broach the material needs of Indigenous peoples or address the systems that create these material needs. Multiculturalism, in tacit ways, comes to appropriate and obscure important discussions about privilege, systemic power, and the way in which particular bodies come to be identified within these moments.

The discussion of multiculturalism registers differently in Francophone Canada. In a recent piece in the Toronto Star, Jonathan Montpetit points to recent strident critiques of multiculturalism in Quebec, where a growing number of *Parti Québecois* politicians have steadfastly been maintaining that "multiculturalism in not a Quebec value." Faced with a troubling anti-immigrant backlash, some scholars in the province have long proposed "interculturalism" as a model of social integration and/or a way to respond to the "accommodation of minorities" (Montpetit, 2011). This model grants the centrality of Francophone culture as a starting point for understanding how to integrate other minorities in the social fabric. The distinction between multiculturalism and interculturalism is very tenuous at best. While interculturalism is different in that it acknowledges the centrality of Francophone or Anglophone culture depending on the social context and location for the discussion, it is ignorant of the racially driven power dynamics that legitimize the white, colonial "settler" narrative in Canada, a narrative within wich Franco-Canadians are equally complicit.

Central to the discussion is the question of identity and inclusiveness within Canada; in particular, cooptation of identity through moments of representation that are governed by the mainstream media which utilizes colonially fashioned cultural narratives and tropes. The problem lies in the way we make sense of citizenry, historically articulated through Anglo-Franco concerns as devoid of indigenous peoples and as negating the sensibilities of the Diasporic movements. What counts for the history books is movement by particular European groups, which have come to deposit themselves by way of the legitimizing category of "settlers", as innate, as always already belonging to the land. Movement by racialised peoples have been "othered" and positioned outside of the nation-state. Sovereignty is positioned in a dominant way through singular/homogenous historical readings of citizenry/identity. So, the coloniality of English and French as legitimating languages endows citizenry. Interculturalism does not escape this.

Notwithstanding these extensive limitations, as an anti-racist educator I do see multiculturalism as an allied discourse. We should be careful not to reject it outright and, in the process, remove a valuable first step towards a more critical anti-racist approach. In this light, we must challenge recent high-level critiques of multiculturalism. Recently, I was invited to give an African Liberation Month [African History Month] guest address to a community group in Edmonton, Alberta. On my way back to Toronto, I picked up a Vancouver Sun newspaper at the airport terminal. Glancing through (as I passed my time at the airport terminal) I read an opinion piece by Licia Corbella. Frankly, it made an interesting and very problematic read for me. Here, we have leaders of the West (including a Canadian intellectual of racial minority background) making such revealing and pointed comments on multiculturalism. In response to immigrant groups who wished to remove their children from certain educational programs on the basis of religious grounds (using the safeguards of the state multiculturalism policy), the university professor is quoted as saying "Immigrants to Canada should adjust to Canada, not the other way around" and adds that, "Canada has an enviable culture based on Judeo-Christian values…with British and French rule of law and traditions and that's why it's better than all of the other places in the world" (see Corbella, 2011). German Chancellor Angela Merkel is adamant that official multiculturalism has "failed totally." British Prime Minister, David Cameron, is also quoted as saying that "under the doctrine of state multiculturalism… we have failed to provide a vision of society to which they [immigrants] feel they want to belong. We have even tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run counter to our values. So when a white person holds objectionable views — racism, for example — we rightly condemn them. But when equally unacceptable

views or practices have come from someone who isn't white, we've been too cautious, frankly even fearful, to stand up to them." Similarly, French President Nicolas Sarkozy is also quoted as asserting: "We have been too concerned about the identity of the person who was arriving and not enough about the identity of the country that was receiving them." These comments must be pleasing to the ears of the average person with doubts about multiculturalism. Coming from such powerful leaders, these ideas cannot be easily dismissed. I know a large cross section of our communities also share these sentiments.

These statements should also elicit fear and the realization that white, racialized discourses are gaining power and voice in more explicit as well as subtle ways; if multiculturalism, a soft discourse of inclusion is under attack, what does this mean for anti-racism? There is a Ghanaian saying, conveyed in a local song, which goes: "If Jesus Christ, the Messiah himself, was crucified on the cross, what do you think they [the crucifiers] will do to the common Pastor? His or her fate will obviously be worse." The sentiment can be appreciated even apart from the Christian faith: If soft multiculturalism is under such attacks, you can imagine what is being said of anti-racism in high places! But I refuse to engage in cowardliness. I believe that anti-racist and anti-colonial methods of perceiving communities can offer some lessons here. In response to these attempts to consolidate white privilege and further marginalize non-white communities, I intentionally mobilize anti-racist and anti-colonial methodologies to give voice to minority lived experiences and situate them at the center of the discussions around inclusion and belonging.

The push to assimilate ethnic and racial minorities and so-called immigrants into a Canadian/American/European Whiteness or into a society built on a white identity needs interrogation (Bedard, 2000). What is troubling in this debate is both the perception of the values of a nation as frozen and immune to the changes happening around it as well as the perceived superiority of Western neoliberal values. Why does one think that Judeo-Christian values are better than other values or more conducive to inclusivity? Immigrants must learn about the cultures of their new homes but the home country must also adapt to the changes around them, especially when the identities of a nation are continually changing through immigration and through the dynamics of social difference. Why is it necessary to stubbornly conceptualize Canada, America, or Europe as white, Judeo-Christian spaces when these categories purposefully exclude and marginalize many of the people that inhabit these areas? Room must be created within the fabric of Canadian society that is accepting of difference and open to mobility of values. We must not position difference as the problem; rather we must work with the strength of difference, welcoming difference as an opportunity for us to grow together as a nation/community. We have to be careful how we comply with certain rigid forms of citizenship, which historically has been steeped in race and the production of civility. The "global" and the "universal" cannot be presented through a prism of the hierarchy of knowing and privileging of particular ideas, values, cultures and identities. Furthermore, we must question how the dominant understanding of multiculturalism misreads or ignores race and other forms of social difference as markers of oppression and, in fact, specifically makes race irrelevant in the Canadian/American/European psyche.

Anti-racism as a discursive and political practice places the myriad forms of racism and their intersections with other forms of oppression in societal institutions on the table for discussion. We cannot shy away from engagement. What does systemic oppression and resistance of the marginalized tell us about the concepts of nation, nationhood, citizenship, citizenship responsibilities, identity, and belonging? The anti-racist and anti-colonial gaze seeks to highlight the material and experiential realities of racialized groups in their dealings with the state and its social institutions (e.g., school system). For example, anti-racism education acknowledges the meanings and implications of race and racial constructs, and how all forms of difference intersect (class, gender, sexual, disability) to script life chances and opportunities. Anti-racism education is involved with learning about the experiences of living with racialized identities and understanding how students' lived experiences in and out of school are implicated in youth engagement and disengagement from school. Anti-racism education also uncovers the ways in which race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, ability, power, and difference influence and are influenced by institutional processes. Anti-racism interrogates the processes of teaching, learning, and educational administration, as well as the ways in which they combine to produce schooling successes and failures for different bodies. Anti-racism opines that questions of power, equity, and social difference are significant for learning outcomes and the provision of opportunities for all youth.

Anti-racism broadens the discussion around identity, citizenship, and belonging to include not only the so-called "immigrants" but other racialized, colonized, oppressed and indigenous bodies in white settler contexts. Anti-racism brings questions about the processes of colonization and racialization to the fore, pointing to how citizenship, community-building, claims of identity, history, politics and knowledge, as well as power sharing and the distribution of resources are embedded within racialized

power relations and mobilized by white privilege to the disadvantage of others. Anti-racism is about power and privilege. It challenges any sense of entitlement, calling for resistance, social responsibility, and collective undertakings to fight oppressions. It is about making claims to self and collective worth that undergird a connection to everyone around us (including social communities and our natural environments). This is why an anti-racist ontology would herald the society, culture, and nature interface and point to a spiritual sense of self and place. Anti-racism is bound by connections of inter-dependency and inclusion.

Anti-racism distinguishes between the notion of "dominant culture/race" etc., from ideas of "majority culture/race". When majority is taken to mean superior or something to be privileged, it is here that we run into problems of social integration. Thus, a critical anti-racist analysis of the majority-minority dynamic is approached more as a question of power relations rather than sheer numbers. Our understanding of group dynamics and social relations, while acknowledging the existence/ presence of majority-minority cultures/groups, will be politically and conceptually flawed if it fails to engage in power and the asymmetrical power relations among groups. In other words, what does it mean when we ask minorities to assimilate or integrate into dominant cultures? What is being affirmed and what is being lost? What histories, identities, and cultures are we denying – and, simultaneously, what is being privileged and at what and whose expense? These are critical questions that anti-racist education brings to the table for discussion. Raising these questions is not about fragmenting communities. It is about building "communities of differences" in which power sharing is as much a concern as the maintaining of groups' identities, cultures, and languages. All groups have rights to maintain their identities, cultures, languages, etc., but not at others' expense. When there is a loss of one's/ group identities, histories, and cultures, the whole goal of social cohesion is lost.

When anti-racism theory is taken up, I sometimes think that the conversation is governed by the assumption that the anti-racist educator is bereft of the Euro-body or the Indigenous body. We must recognize that anti-racism education is not exclusive to a particular group, community, or identity. Therefore, we must come together in the name of community, shared politics, solidarity, social justice, and social change to engage the theory and practice of anti-racism education if we are seeking a harmonious way of life through difference. More importantly, we must ask about what it means for the Euro-body to do anti-racism work? Such a question invariably speaks to other concerns: Where does knowledge reside? How do we come to know? What is knowledge and/or what knowledge counts? How do power and knowledge intersect? These questions are about accessibility and rights. At the same time, we must be cautious about coming to know in ways that classify the historic constituents of colonization. We must avoid a theorizing that accords a particular privileging and discursive authority onto minoritized bodies of knowledge while at the same time working with historically contingent variables. This, in turn, opens up possibilities for discussing the historic specificities and the myriad sites of complexities and contestation of colonization, in relation to the ongoing production of settler nation-state. The recognition of complexities and contextualization is important because it allows us to move away from reliance of dogmatization of a particular theoretical framework—the "my way or the highway" conversation (i.e., multiculturalism versus anti-racism, etc). Instead, I invite a theorizing in which all learners can engage in an intellectually honest conversation, allowing for the complicities and complexities of the different historic bodies, as entangled within the politics and representations of settler/citizen/immigrant, to come to the surface.

This paper is more about the implications of the education of learners that flow from the policy of multiculturalism/interculturalism and the need to shift the gaze away from multicultural/inter-cultural education onto critical anti-racist education. One cannot say this loud enough: the school is a site in need of anti-racist, anti-colonial readings, interpretations, interventions, disruptions, and subversions. Learners of today are and must be anti-colonial subjects and agents. The "anti" (in anti-racist/anti-colonial) is not simply oppositional or confrontational but, more importantly, "action-oriented", liberatory, productive, and transformational. We must push forward in the recognition of the value of diversity and oppositional knowledges. We must be willing to interrogate both what we are resisting and also our own resistance, recognizing our multiple positions and never stopping in our fight against discourses of marginalization and oppression, never losing sight of what we are fighting for. Objective neutrality is not an option.

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