

Multiculturalism, the Canadian academy, and the impossible dream of Black Canadian Studies

A DISMAL FAILURE

Multiculturalism in Canada from a black scholarly perspective has been a dismal failure. In making such a claim I want to stress that I am particularly speaking to the humanities and the social sciences. In my view, from that vantage point, the Canadian academic scene is racist to the core. I make this claim not as a comparative claim, but as one that I believe stands the test in relation to the Canadian academic environment itself. I have been a full-time academic for 15 years working in the area of black cultural studies and over that period black Canadian studies has remained a nascent field of inquiry and the future looks much the same.

The inability to produce programs, courses, and academic positions that cast their lens on black cultures in the Canadian academic sphere is what I identify and indict as racism. This is an institutional racism that refuses to acknowledge multiple forms of black inquiry, that refuses to see how scholars who focus on black peoples can contribute and do contribute to wider networks of scholarship, and that fundamentally refuses to invest in black Canadian concerns, issues, and interests. For me it all adds up to a deep, core institutional racism that only notices black people as a problem or as a means to some other kind of end, but never for what black people interested in black people can contribute to our creation of knowledge.

Since the 1960s, Canadian universities have established African Studies programs and Caribbean Studies Programs that have acted in part as proxies for black Canadians to investigate themselves when given the opportunity. However, these half-starved African Studies and Caribbean Studies programs

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have not been able to sustain inquiry into black lives in Canada in any sustained manner, given their economic poverty. It is from this vantage point that multicultural efforts in Canadian universities are a massive failure. That I can think of no program at any Canadian university that is solely dedicated to the study of black life in Canada is depressingly dreadful. In fact, when black life in Canada is even given a nod it is now dressed up in immigration studies and transnational studies, but still with little interest in the actual black communities here. This signal failure of multiculturalism on our university campuses means that as our student demographics shift and change in urban centers like Toronto, our faculties and their interests remain permanently and characteristically white—there is no other way to name it.

RECENT EFFORTS: RESEARCH CHAIRS IN BLACK STUDIES

Most recently, and largely owing to community efforts, there has been a move to name chairs of research at Canadian universities that honour black people's contributions to Canadian society. The first chair, the James Robertson Johnson Chair in Black Canadian Studies at Dalhousie, has more recently been followed by the Jean Augustine Chair at York, and there are future plans for the Michaëlle Jean Chair at the University of Alberta. Those three chairs are meant to honour black Canadians who have stood out among their peers in their fields. These chairs represent a significant political statement and the manner in which each of them is treated and supported by their host institutions tells us a lot about how those institutions value Black Studies, even when the chair itself might not be solely dedicated to Black Studies (as with the Augustine Chair at York).

However, one of the central problems with some of these efforts is that they continue to act from a place that imagines black people as only recent arrivals in Canada, undermining and attempting to unwrite black people's much longer presence in both colonial Canada and post-Confederation Canada. Such approaches also seem to have no idea of how to account for the children born of the post-Second World War black migrants to this place, who can by no stretch of the imagination be merely considered Caribbean or African or immigrant, for that matter (notwithstanding notions of flexible citizenship and such). Many of these efforts only ever think about black Canadians within a logic of immigration and thus leave out a crucial aspect of Canada's long narrative of disciplining blackness in this nation. What is particularly

distressing is that across this country black people have consistently organized and contested educational practices as one way to make their citizenship felt in this land. However, those efforts are often not seen as contributing to the larger society. And in the academic realm, black people have let universities off the hook by not demanding adequate representation in them as they have in the area of public education.

CONTINUED ABSENCE OF BLACK HISTORIES

Recently, one of Ontario's deans of education was much excited by the ways in which the recent *Roots of Violence Report*, authored by Roy McMurtry and Alvin Curling, looked into youth violence—a matter in which black and Aboriginal youth are a significant factor—and made, as they should, mental health issues a major aspect of their recommendations. What was most interesting is that the dean was interested in mental health issues almost to the exclusion of the other issues and recommendations raised by the report. This troubling highlighting of mental health by the dean at the expense of other issues—issues in which a school education ought to play a major role—was not surprising to me.

The *Roots of Violence Report* is also critical of the ways in which public school education still silences black histories, and also of the ways in which black histories remain absent from the broader Canadian national imagina-

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tion—all issues that a faculty of education could and should lead on. But instead the dean was more interested, I suspect, in seizing on the mental health issues and the recommendation raised as a way to have access to the sizable dollars at Canadian Institutes of Health Research. The sizable grants from CIHR would make any dean swoon, given university budgets. It is in such a fashion that I make the claim above that the Canadian academy is racist and only interested in black people insofar as such an interest furthers the agendas and priorities of those who are already there.

BACK TO THE 1960s: RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF BLACK STUDIES

I believe that multiculturalism exists in a variety of forms—official multiculturalism, popular or everyday multiculturalism, and commoditized multiculturalism—and that struggles over its meaning and how it might translate into everyday life are crucial and necessary. However, if we look at how multiculturalism has played itself out in Canada's universities and in

academic culture, it appears, both as an aspiration and a policy, to have been a dismal failure.


In my view, the only way to begin to fix this failure is to return to the 1960s. By this I mean that the establishment of Black Studies programs now would do much to aid the absence of black life in our academy. As I suggested above, in the initial establishment of area studies program like Caribbean Studies and African Studies and even in newer programs like diaspora studies and transnational studies programs, black life still often goes missing.

The challenge for genuine multiculturalism on our campuses calls for administrators with vision, faculty who can see beyond reproducing themselves, and a general commitment to producing campuses that reflect our demographics and the communities within which they are located, as well as a curriculum that is also representative of those communities. Such a vision would move us closer to a practice of multiculturalism that is in line with the everyday realities of our multicultural lives in the close urban spaces we currently inhabit. 

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customs were being modified. While differing from each other in their capacity to re-establish themselves—we should not discount significant class distinctions between them—European immigrants rebuilt meaningful lives, families, and communities that also made a mark on the Canadian landscape. Ethnic foodways helped transform the culinary landscapes of cities like Toronto and Montreal. Similarly, the

newcomers' anti-Communism helped shape a pro-capitalist democratic discourse and helped the Canadian state to meet its long-standing objective of destroying the left-wing ethnic press, though international events also mattered in this regard. A more decidedly multicultural but still largely white and still non-egalitarian society emerged out of the many interactions, conflicts, and accommodations just described. In

short, early post-war liberal pluralism contained the complex, sometimes contradictory, and racially exclusionary elements that would inform official multiculturalism of the 1970s. 

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