



RACISM IN CANADA

ORMOND McKAGUE

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PREFACE

This book, *Racism in Canada*, launches what will become an annual publishing tradition: the FIFTH HOUSE READER. Each year, a new volume will bring together a collection of essays by a variety of authors that will address an important issue or topic of concern to Canadians.

There are few issues in 1991 more pertinent and more fundamentally important, more threatening to Canada's development as a humane and progressive society, more hidden and more misunderstood, than racism. From the barricades at Oka to our increasingly turbulent and tragic inner cities; from northern outposts to corporate boardrooms; from economic structures, such as the Great Whale Project, to cultural structures, such as equal access to Canada Council funding; from rocks hurled on the bridge to Chambly to insults spat out in Legion halls—everywhere, in every aspect of our society, we find racism. Of course such a thread in the Canadian fabric is not new. It has been present from the very beginning and is systemic, deeply embedded in the fundamental structures of our society. What is new is a growing visibility, as aboriginal peoples challenge these structures and systems, challenge this history; as immigration policy and global forces transform the face and voice, the class and social structure of our cities and our countryside. What is new, also, is an unwillingness to accept the racist assumptions of the past, an unwillingness to continue to believe, with typical Canadian complacency, that we are not a racist society. The result in recent years has been growing confrontation: on the streets, on the reserves, in the workplace, in the culture, in legislatures, in the academy, and in the courtroom.

No book can provide a truly comprehensive discussion of such a complex issue as racism in Canada, but it is hoped that this collection will be a part of that process of challenge and confrontation; that it will illuminate and clarify issues of Canadian racism, both historical and contemporary; and that it will lead to further reading, research, and writing on the subject. Much needs to be done. For example, "multiculturalism" is a policy and a structure now deeply embedded in Canada's consciousness and social practice. At the present time it is being attacked from the right in a more or less blatantly racist fashion. What we need,

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however, is an antiracist critique of multiculturalism, an analysis of the ways in which racism is hidden, or even encouraged, by multicultural policies. A second contemporary focus of research and action is the danger of what Marlene Nourbese Philip has recently called "the present climate of anti-racist fashionableness [which] makes cosmetic changes while leaving the underlying structures intact." Articles such as are contained in this book can provide important and necessary perspectives on these and other issues of Canadian racism.

The book is organized topically so that the issue of racism can be seen as historical, systemic, and personal. There is an attempt to show that racism in Canada is not an isolated phenomenon but is intimately linked to issues of sexism, the economy, class structure, and culture. The possibilities for future action on several fronts are presented and the book concludes with a list of further readings. Articles have been selected from both "popular" and academic journals and it is hoped that the combination will prove useful. Racism in Canada is not a "dry-as-dust" topic for statistical and quantitative analysts, although such research is powerful and valuable. It is a constant, horrifying, lived experience for many Canadians. It has, as Dionne Brand and Krisantha Sri Bhaggiyadatta have written, "a brutal face sanctioned by culture and historical precedence." That face is now visible and must be understood and eradicated. It is hoped that this book will contribute both to that understanding and to racism's subsequent eradication in Canada.

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Ormond McKague
General Editor

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REFLECTIONS ON RACISM: CANADIANS SPEAK



INSTITUTIONALIZED RACISM AND CANADIAN HISTORY: NOTES OF A BLACK CANADIAN

A D R I E N N E S H A D D

Reprinted from *Seeing Ourselves: Exploring Race, Ethnicity and Culture*,
edited by Carl E. James, 1989

It always amazes me when people express surprise that there might be a "race problem" in Canada, or when they attribute the "problem" to a minority of prejudiced individuals. Racism is, and always has been, one of the bedrock institutions of Canadian society, embedded in the very fabric of our thinking, our personality.

I am a fifth-generation black Canadian who was born and raised in a small black farming village called North Buxton, near Chatham, Ontario. North Buxton is a community comprised of the descendants of the famous Elgin Settlement of escaped slaves who travelled the Underground Railroad to freedom in Canada in the 1850s. As a young girl growing up in the fifties and sixties, I became aware of the overt hostility of whites in the area when we would visit nearby towns. Children would sometimes sneer at us and spit, or call us names. When we would go into the local ice cream parlour, the man behind the counter would serve us last, after all the whites had been served, even if they came into the shop after us. Southwestern Ontario may as well have been below the Mason-Dixon line in those days. Dresden, home of the historic Uncle Tom's Cabin, made national headlines in 1954 when blacks tested the local restaurants after the passage of the Fair Accommodation Practices Act and found that two openly refused to serve them. This came as no surprise, given that for years certain eateries, hotels, and recreational clubs were restricted to us, and at one time blacks could only sit in designated sections of movie theatres (usually the balcony), if admitted at all. Yet this particular incident sent shock waves through the nation, embarrassed about such evidence of racial "intolerance" going on in its own backyard.

Somehow, this kind of racism never bothered me. I always felt superior to people who were so blind that they could not see our basic humanity. Such overt prejudice, to my mind, revealed a fundamental weakness or fear. Although, instinctively, I knew that I was *not inferior*,

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there was not one positive role model outside our tiny community, and the image of blacks in the media was universally derogatory. Africans were portrayed as backward heathens in the Tarzan movies we saw, and black Americans were depicted through the characters of Step 'n Fetchit, Amos 'n Andy, Buckwheat of "Our Gang" fame, or the many maids who graced the television and movie screens in small bit parts. (Black Canadians were virtually nonexistent in the Canadian media.) I used to wonder if it could really be true that black people the world over were so poor, downtrodden, inarticulate, and intellectually inferior, as the depictions seemed to suggest.

At the age of 10, we moved to Toronto. In the largely white neighbourhood where we lived, I was initially greeted by silent, nervous stares on the part of some children, who appeared afraid of me, or at least afraid to confront me openly. Later, as I began to develop an awareness of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements through my readings, certain friends would respond with a frozen silence if I brought up the name of Malcolm X, or, for that matter, the latest soul record on the charts. Looking back, I can see that things ran fairly smoothly as long as the question of race could be ignored, and as long as I did not transgress the bounds of artificial "colour blindness" under which I was constrained. This, apparently, was the Torontonians approach to race relations.

I share these reminiscences to illustrate the different forms which racism has taken over time, and in varying locales in Canada, whether in the form of overt hostility and social ostracism as in southwestern Ontario, or in the subtle, polite hypocrisy of race relations in Toronto in the sixties.

But how, you may ask, do these personal experiences represent examples of institutionalized racism? Do they not depend on the attitudes of people, which vary from individual to individual? Are not our Canadian laws and policies very clear about the fundamental rights of all people to equal treatment and opportunities?

The problem with this line of thinking is that it fails to recognize how powerfully attitudes and behaviour are shaped by the social climate and practices around us. If the only image you have of black women is derived from the one on your pancake box, then there is something wrong with the media portrayal of racial minorities. If there are no visible minorities in the boardrooms of the corporate world, and few in positions of influence and authority in the workforce, this sends a message far more potent than the human rights legislation set up to create a more equitable distribution of rewards and opportunities. When generation after generation of school children continue to be taught only about the accomplishments of white Europeans in Canada—mostly men—the myth that this is "traditionally a white country," as I heard a reporter say the other day, will persist, unchallenged.

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The selective recording of some historical events and the deliberate omission of others have not been accidental, and they have had far-reaching consequences. Blacks and other people "of colour" are viewed as recent newcomers, or worse, "foreigners" who have no claim to a Canadian heritage except through the "generosity" of Canadian immigration officials, who "allow" a certain quota of us to enter each year.

But this myth that Canada is a white country is insidious because, on the one hand, it is so ingrained in the national consciousness, and on the other hand, so lacking in foundation. There is a tendency to forget that Native peoples were here first; blacks, first brought as slaves in the 1600 and 1700s, were among the earliest to settle on Canadian soil; the presence of the Chinese is traced to the 19th century. In fact, people from a wide variety of races and nationalities helped to build this country. Unfortunately, this reality is not reflected in our school curricula.

The long black presence and contribution to Canada's development continues to go unacknowledged. People are surprised to learn, for example, that 10% of the Loyalists who migrated to British North America after the American Revolution were black. Their descendants, particularly in the Maritimes, have been living in quasi-segregated communities for over 200 years. Blacks were one of the largest groups to enter the country during the 19th century when 40-60,000 fugitive slaves and free people "of colour" sought refuge in Canada West (Ontario) between 1815-1860.

Standard textbooks never mention that, in 1734, part of the city of Montreal was burned down by Marie-Joseph Angelique, a black female slave, when she learned of her impending sale by her slave mistress. Most Canadians are not even aware that slavery existed in this country. Women's history courses fail to acknowledge that the first newspaper-woman in Canada was a black, Mary Ann Shadd, who edited a paper for fugitives between 1853-1859 in Toronto and later Chatham, Ontario. Heartwarming stories such as that of Joe Fortes - a Barbadian-born sailor who came to British Columbia in 1885 and subsequently, as the lifeguard of English Bay, taught three generations of young people to swim - are all but forgotten. Fortes is considered a true Canadian hero to those who are still around to remember him, but it seems that many younger British Columbians believe Fortes was a white man. And did any of you know that the term "the real McCoy" was coined after the inventions of a black man, Elijah McCoy, born in Harrow, Ontario, in 1840?¹

Today's students, black and white, look to the United States for information regarding the Civil Rights Movement, unaware that a gripping saga exists right here in Ontario. In the forties and fifties, organizations such as the Windsor Council on Group Relations, the National Unity Association of Chatham-Dresden-North Buxton, the

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Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and the Negro Citizens' Association of Toronto fought segregation in housing, accommodations, and employment, as well as racist immigration laws. Much of the antidiscrimination and human rights legislation that we now take for granted are a direct result of the struggles which these groups waged.

Certainly, these few bits of information alter our perception of what has traditionally been taught in Canadian history textbooks. At the very least, they lead us to question the prevailing assumption that Canada was settled and built strictly by white Europeans. The educational system could be at the forefront in dispelling many of the myths and stereotypes which fuel racist thinking today. Instead, it aggravates the problem by channelling disproportionate numbers of black children into low-level academic courses and, ultimately, dead-end positions in life.

The point I am making is that racism is not simply a phenomenon which afflicts the minds of individuals and causes these individuals to perform discriminatory acts. Racism is something which afflicts an entire society; it is ingrained and reinforced in all the major and minor institutions of the society. Even in the most seemingly "objective" of undertakings, such as the writing of our national history, racism has operated to exclude minority groups from the historical landscape, thus rendering their accomplishments invisible, and therefore insignificant.

Second, racism is not something which simply affects its victims in various adverse ways. It also benefits all those against whom it is not directed, by affording certain privileges. Just remember that for every visible minority who is denied a position because of his/her colour there is a majority group member who is awarded that same position because of his/her colour. Many well-intentioned white Canadians fail to recognize that their life-style and position in society is based on a system of class and race privilege. Of course, men enjoy additional privileges based on their gender. Rather than focusing energy on helping the victims of racism, some of these people should examine the problem from the standpoint of their own situations of privilege. Perhaps in this way, more creative solutions to inequality can be initiated in the light of this kind of alternative outlook.²

On a more personal level, even the most subtle and polite forms of racism can be detrimental, especially as they affect children. In my own case, when we moved to Toronto I was made to feel different, alien, even though no one specifically referred to my racial origin. It is a feeling which has never fully left me and perhaps explains why to this day I do not feel comfortable in the company of a group of white people. And when some whites think they are paying black people a compliment by saying, "We don't think of you as black," as my sister's friends have told her, this is not just a misplaced nicety; it is an insult. We are not seeking "honorary" white status.

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Before we as a society can liberate ourselves from the grip of racism, we have to acknowledge that it exists, and that it is not something which has been blown out of proportion; neither is it the figment of some people's imaginations. If we can do this much, we will at least have moved out from under the heavy shroud of self-delusion and deceit. That in itself would be a refreshing step forward.

SURVIVING AS A NATIVE WOMAN ARTIST

JOANE CARDINAL - SCHUBERT

Reprinted from *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme* (Spring 1990)

*This is an excerpt from a speech given at the opening of "Diversities,"
an exhibition of the work of George Littlechild, Jane Ash Poitras, and
Joane Cardinal-Schubert at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary in October 1989.*

Some of you people here today are here out of respect, some out of curiosity, some as disbelievers. You don't know whether we belong here—showing in your museum as artists. After all, Native people have been curiosities for so long.

It is only a hundred years since our ancestors lived in tipis, hunted the buffalo, and invented beef jerky. It is only a hundred years and some since your ancestors herded us onto reserves, washed us with scrub brushes and lye soap, and chopped our hair off, uniforming the children in religious residential schools in an attempt to knock out the savagery. Our ancestors were beaten for speaking their language, their mother tongue: now we have major political battles in this country over whose mother tongue is the most important. It is only a hundred years and now we stand before you in this institution with our art work on the walls. Now we are civilized, aren't we?

We have come from a culture that has developed in one hundred years to the space age, something that has taken your collective cultures thousands of years. Yet still our people are criticized. We have to try harder than anyone else because we are diplomats for each other. We cannot afford one drunk in the street, one panhandler: we are stereotyping each other every day with our actions. People ask me questions about other Native people in this country, they ask me what they think, they think we are connected by some form of microchip. This country is as full of as many diverse nations and languages as the continent of Europe. If Native people across the country appear to agree on issues it is because the issues are all the same: land, education, money, culture, language rights, and the environment.

I am here today as an artist, as a communicator, as a maker of visual imagery; one of the most powerful forms of communicative expression that we have. I have included words for those of you who have a hard

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time with pictures; there is no excuse for you not understanding what my work is about if you take the time to really look and see, as I have been doing. I feel a responsibility to communicate.

In 1983 I travelled to Stonehenge fulfilling a childhood dream. I travelled through landscape that could have been in British Columbia. Arriving, I saw huge stones in a circle erected by a then primitive people. It was while standing near these huge landmarks that I thought of the very ancient consideration of the future that was a part of this indigenous culture and I realized how very harmonious this beginning was with the indigenous peoples of North America. We too have erected stone landmarks of astronomical size, some many thousands of years old. These are, however, not revered as is Stonehenge—many saw their demise with the beginning of agriculture, others more recently at the hands of the developers, many only exist in the memory of the people or as a part of archaeological record, some are displayed in part as curiosities.

For thousands of years our culture respected nature and only took from the environment what it needed. It did not need mandates to understand the balance of nature but took its direction from the dictates of nature. It was a culture that took note when the leaves fell, when the snow fell, how much rain there was in a year, how the coats of the animals looked. It was a culture that did not make divisions between life, art, and religion.

My part in the preservation of a seemingly invisible culture—on the plains we don't have totem poles—is as a receptor or translator, one who would point out what there once was, what there still is, and the importance of all this to us. If it only serves to interest the viewer on the level of “nice pictures,” that's fine with me, but it is made with the intent of serving many viewers on many levels and as a form of expression that I must take.

I am here out of respect for my people—the people that were unknown to me for most of my life. Other people knew more about me than I knew about myself. “You're an Indian!” the kids screamed at me at school. “You're a half-breed!” they said as they got older and had listened to their parents' dinner conversations. “You're a Metis!” they started to whisper in the 1970s, gentrifying the term “half-breed” or “mixed blood.”

With all these people knowing more about me than I did, I thought it required a closer look. I was coming from a position of weakness, which is what lack of knowledge is. I found out that my father and his brother had had Indian names. I found out that my greatgrandmother had lived in Rocky Mountain House in the 1950s. We used to go blueberry and Saskatoonberry picking there and my father would disappear for hours—gone to visit his grandmother. I found out that I had relatives at Morley and a whole other family in southern Alberta.

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I found out other things too. I found out that Indian people couldn't vote until after 1960, I found out that if they wished to leave the reserve they had to pay for a pass, I found out that most of the government issue meat that came to the reserves disappeared and either no meat or rotten meat was distributed. I found out that smallpox blankets were distributed to the Indians from the United States. I found out that whole villages filled with death lodges were left on the prairie, filled with thousands of people who had died from smallpox. I found letters in the Canada sessional papers that talked about funding for residential schools and the disparaging influences camped around the schools—parents trying to see their children who were taken away to become statistics.

In a museum in Rocky Mountain House, I found the Tree of Life chart drawn by pious Father Lacombe, who started Dunbow school near Calgary. I found the pathway to heaven known only to one Indian. The rest came along the path where one of the seven deadly sins—that of slothfulness—had been depicted. You can see this chart on the third floor of the museum. It has every Indian going to hell.

I found out that being an Indian was determined by treaty right and I found out that a lot of the people in the cities, the urban Indians, were non-status and that I was one of them.

I started asking questions in my artwork, drawing pictures of all those chiefs, those Canadian heroes with their Victoria medals burning a hole in their chests for the generations to come. I did these paintings from 1969 to 1973. I drew and painted very personal statements then.

As the years went by and I continued to work I began to see a pattern among other peoples of the world. People united to form lobby groups to save Africa, and to help the people in India, and people began to immigrate here from war-torn countries. I kept hearing about the Third World. Finally in 1984 on a trip to Ottawa I asked the question of International Development for Education in the Arts (CIDEA): what are you doing for our Third World country that exists in Canada?

My work began to take a more political—as some people called it—bent. It seems anything involved with Native people is categorized as being political or an artefact. I began to make contemporary artefacts in protest against the National Gallery's treatment of artists of Native heritage.

I started to like myself, I began to take a stand, I was proud of my heritage. I had always been taught by my parents to be proud of who I was and I now extended it to be proud of my people. I liked the person I saw in the mirror, but I noticed that the sight of me brought a kind of shifty-foot-changing attitude. I was watched in stores, I stood for a long time at counters waiting to be waited on, I heard people talk about my people in the streets, the panhandlers, the drunks, the stories about

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needing a bus ticket to visit the wife in hospital. I remembered the boys joking in high school through clenched teeth about picking up a squaw at Smokey Lake. I remembered my biology teacher talking about oriental eye folds and telling us he could see a few in the class.

But things are different now, aren't they?

Not much. Look at this exhibition here at the Glenbow. Look at "The Spirit Sings" show. During a time when the world's eyes were on us, a major exhibition is created that travels across the country freezing the Native people into a romantic notion of the seventeenth century. Look at the exhibition in the Vancouver Art Gallery: "Beyond History—10 Little Indians." Here we're three.

Don't misunderstand me—I have absolutely no problem exhibiting my work with my own kind. But I am different. You have all made me different. You taught me about the discipline of art and being a professional and to me that means it is art that is shown in this category "New Alberta Art." I have been around a long time—it's a good thing I left the country and the province with my work or I may never have been shown at the Glenbow. It's a good thing that the assistant curator is from the east. It's pretty hard to deny excellence when other people celebrate it and recognize it.

That is not really the part I have the problem with because it is pretty standard for artists not to be appreciated in their home town; in fact it is fairly standard among all creators. What I have a problem with is the categorization of Native Artist in a museum that does not separate other Canadian artists in exhibitions according to their race.

It seems Native people cannot do anything without that adjective in front of their name.

The other artists in the exhibition, George Littlechild and Jane Ash Poitras, may not share my views. That is understandable; they are just beginning their careers. For me it has been a constant battle since entering art college here in Calgary in 1962. Nothing has been handed to me on a silver platter, but I have drawn the energy from all this negativity and turned it into a positive force. The racism I have suffered has only focused me more on the battle against racism. It is one of the warshirts that I wear now. I know there is a purpose for me on this Earth and I will make a difference.

To my fellow exhibitors: I am proud to exhibit my work with you and to know that even though your road will be rough that I will have helped to create some smooth patches for you as those artists I have listed on the blackboards have done for me and for us all.

To those people whose life is affected by racism, I say as my father taught me, "Just take a stand, just fight and never give in, never give in to those bastards."