

# Wounded Sentiments

## Multiculturalism, the 'Toronto 17', and the National Imaginary

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Since the arrest of the "Toronto 17" in July 2006, the popular media discourse has revolved around the shock at the possibility that there are Canadian citizens who would want to harm the nation state. This shock has been personified by the depiction of a national body that has been wounded by a threat to its multicultural ideals. We hope to argue, however, that it has not been Canadian egalitarian values that have been damaged but rather the mechanisms through which Canada produces its self-image – its "national imaginary" – in the face of its racist, imperialist and exploitative underpinnings.

— | antithesis



At the heart of our critique of the reaction to the "Toronto 17" case is that it constructs Canada as an innocent, non-threatening and benevolent state. Indeed, many have even gone so far as to suggest that opposition to the Canadian state stems from a hatred of the "Canadian" ideals of tolerance, democracy and justice. This conveniently ignores a long list of Canada's unjust activities domestically, globally, and historically. For example, the inception of the Canadian state depended on the dispossession and colonization of First Nations. How can a state be built on the foundations of justice when it was created at the expense of the sovereignty of entire peoples? How can we grandstand about human rights when it was the white settlers that decimated the First Nations population? Indeed, the state, yet to be decolonized, continues to oppose just settlements with First Nations through its ostentatious contestation of land claims. This is just one example of how the Canadian state perpetuates the legacy of colonialism on First Nation's Peoples.

Another aspect of the media's treatment of multiculturalism has revolved around disbelief that immigrants could be "ungrateful" to the country that has absorbed them into its pluralistic wings. This sentiment again fails to appreciate the racist institutions that have

historically structured the immigrant experience in Canada. Indeed until 1945, Canadian immigration policy explicitly barred “undesirable racials” (essentially non-whites and Jews) from entering the country, or placed a head tax on those imported for labour. The Eurocentric and white supremacist bases of the state can also be seen in the internment of Japanese-Canadians, the Komagata Maru incident and the current dubious detentions of Muslim men under “anti-terror” laws, such as the infamous Secret Trial 5. Racism is not only an experiential aspect of immigration but has also resulted in a particularly racialized political economy.

The rhetoric of multiculturalism espoused in media responses to the “Toronto 17” helps obscure the reality of Canadian nationhood based on racist intolerance and exploitation. Canada’s hands are not clean in the global scene either. Its involvement in the invasion of Afghanistan, the meddling in Haiti and “peace-keeping” in Somalia (with infamously disastrous results) are all recent examples of Canadian interventionist agendas. Furthermore, its partnership with American imperialism, guised under the language of a “war on terror”, is another example of how the Canadian state is involved in, and depends on, various forms of violence. This is at the crux of our problem: given these realities, how can the state be constructed as innocent and how can action against it inspire so much shock? It is clear that dominant ideology, and specifically multiculturalist thinking, helps produce a national mythology; a mythology that requires a national imaginary that the media has been trying to reaffirm over the past week

Given that crime and violence amongst citizens (particularly perpetrated upon feminine and racialized bodies) do not regularly produce hysteria, the true shock comes not from the possibility of violence – be it rape, murder, or otherwise – but the threat to the state through its national imaginary, which is essential to constituting and maintaining its boundaries. This imaginary is dependant upon the image of a benevolent, non-violent state, constructed as a pristine body that bears no battle markings or blemishes. Neither has it perpetrated violence (thereby free of implication), nor has it been the victim of vio-

lence; for any acknowledgment of past victimization implies that there must have been cause for inflicting harm. Such a motive or reason would, of course, rupture the national imaginary. Thus, in order to keep the body of the state pure and continue to portray the nation as one of multicultural tolerance, the “Toronto 17” must be understood through a de-politicized lens, where only an irrational, ideologically-motivated group of individuals could (supposedly) desire to harm such innocence.

Any attempt to critique this presumed national innocence would attack both how Canada defines and experiences itself. The media discourse surrounding the “Toronto 17”, evidently racist, essentialist, and filled with dramatic hyperboles of “they hate our freedom”, has not simply been a defensive reaction to the charges presented by RCMP and CSIS. Rather, it is an essential method of ensuring that the national imaginary remains firmly in its place. In turn, such discourses are critical to articulating and defining what is in the best interest of the nation – notably, stricter immigration policy, greater trampling of civil rights, and the need for increased security. Given the contemporary realities of war and destruction inflicted on primarily Muslim countries, the national imaginary further enables the production of a reductionist image of the “West and the Rest” to justify its global agendas.

You’re Right, Multiculturalism Doesn’t Work

In the barrage of public discussion that has followed the sensationalist events of July, we find ourselves once again faced with a debate on “multiculturalism”. The continually regurgitated phrase “is multiculturalism working?” most often begins from the same presumption of innocence as is believed to define the history of the Canadian state. Multiculturalism, it is claimed, was supposed to be our pride and joy: our claim to uniqueness; our happily brandished “Get Out of Jail Free” card in face of any accusations of practices that look suspiciously like racism or intolerance; that which makes us the envy of the rest of the world. Ethnic conflict? Look at Canada,

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where apart from Quebec, we all get along just great. Forced assimilation? Look at Canada, where aboriginal arts appear as national symbols, where it is common to have



students in a classroom from every region of the world, and where quaint ethnic neighbourhoods offer costume, craft and cuisine up for consumption as capitalist proof of multi-cultured integration. But all of a sudden some of them are dissatisfied – oh dear, has multiculturalism been too nice?

Throughout the debate about Canada’s self-congratulatory multiculturalism that has followed Saturday’s events, there has been little substantial dialogue about how its highly lauded integration model operates. Exactly what form of integration does “multiculturalism” command? Or, more specifically, into whose model are immigrants supposed to integrate into? The white, middle-class, secular ideal to which we are told to aspire is not only undesirable to many (and rightly so), it is inaccessible and impossible. There is no acknowledgment of structural barriers to such integration, and how in fact multicultural policies shut down room for critical debate. Multiculturalism can breed terrorists by allowing them not to assimilate and allow-

ing Muslims to keep to their own neighbourhoods, CBC informs us. That forced ghettoization has anything to do with labour and socioeconomic barriers is unmentioned; that the racialization of space both stems from and is a result of racism, which confines populations to “their own neighbourhoods” and causes communities to come together in the face of outside rejection simply cannot be spoken. We are a multicultural state, remember? We accept everyone.

In listening to discussions throughout the week after the arrests, we became disgusted by the continual reoccurrence of the question, “if they don’t like our values, why do they come here?” Well, ‘our values’, as we know, are built upon stolen land and the bodies and labour of aboriginal and immigrant populations. Furthermore, there is no mention of global economic and political factors that are causing forced migration in mass numbers at an unprecedented scale in human history. Canada’s willing participation in neoliberal institutions such as NAFTA and the WTO furthers the economic integration of countries into a globalized capitalist economy, flooding foreign markets with goods which devalue domestic products and cause the export and exploitation of cheap labour to fuel consumerist desires at home. Migration is thus not simply a choice.

Yet regardless of the multiplicity of reasons for which Muslims are a growing population in Canada today, given our multicultural tolerance, one would expect to find room for respectful diversity, at least. It is at times like these that we are reminded, through public discourse and the reassertion of the national imaginary, what the true definition of “Canadianness” is.

Defining the Nation; Defining the Other

The hegemonic white, consumerist subject that form the premise of dominant Canadian culture alienate all peoples who deviate from this historically positioned identity. There is thus no room for discussing how domi-

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nant consumer-based cultural mores may indeed be alienating for many, including many Muslim, persons. But for Muslims, we are further faced with the existence of an imperialism which clearly defines us as a global Other. The very ability to define oneself as Muslim, and not Secular and White, is under attack.

Over the past week, there have been continual attempts in the media to solicit the testimonies of Muslims to prove that the National Other is not the Muslim (necessarily), but the “Bad Muslim.” The opinions these Muslims can voice are limited within certain terms of engagement; terms under which we cannot interrogate the realities of racism and imperialism, but have to take an apologetic tone and claim “we are not all bad!” Indeed we must prove that we are “Good Muslims” whose faith is confined purely to our personal-spiritual identity (and cannot be politicized or the basis of a morally guided political praxis), and who attempt to live the middle-class Canadian dream and do not deviate from status quo sentiments and desires. We are forced to prove that we love the Canadian state for its pluralistic benevolence and ignore its imperialist, racist and exploitative tendencies.

This typography requires certain Muslim spokespersons to legitimize the polarizing of who is a part of the social body and who is not. The media vehemently recruits these individuals to reassure Canadians that racism and social alienation do not produce rage because these spokespeople are Muslim too, and even they find these Muslim Others abhorrent. Through these relations, the self is thus reaffirmed by not only defining ‘the Other’ (the Bad, “freedom-hating”, Muslim), but also defining the self’s (the Canadian State’s) jurisdiction to control and produce the terms on which the Other can interact with the social body. This occurs through discussion on how to “integrate” Muslims into “Canadian society” and justifies the imposition of such racialized and legally dubious devices as security certificates.

Another aspect of the “Toronto 17” in media discourse has been the nationalism Muslims are being forced to adopt. In proving the status of a “Good Muslim”, we are

asked to legitimize our presence on this territory by espousing an uncritical zeal for the state. Nationalism always works to shroud status quo relations and exploitation by constructing an imagined commune to which one must be emotionally and viscerally committed. There have thus been charges that if certain groups do not accept the dominant mores, they have no reason to be here. We are forced into celebratory nationalism or are labelled “Enemies Within” who must be exorcised (or deported). As outlined earlier, immigration is not a favour the state endows, nor necessarily a “choice”, but a historical



product of exploitation Canada continues to benefit from.

Ultimately, then, it is important not to fall into apologetic nationalisms, or “gratefulness”, but to maintain a critical lens on, and oppositional praxis to, Canada’s role in the unjust Order of Things. Current debates around multiculturalism and shock can be conceptualized as “wounded sentiments”: it is not the integrity of the national body that is being challenged but rather the national imaginary. This imaginary has produced the “Toronto 17” as having violated core Canadian ideals. As we have discussed, these ideals are in fact not “freedom-loving” and “tolerant” but a particular configuration of racist imperialist thinking disguised in ahistorical multiculturalist ideology.