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Reparations and racism, discourse and diversity: Neoliberal multiculturalism and the Canadian age of apologies☆

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ABSTRACT

Political scientists have recently noted that we live in an "age of apologies", in which there is a surge of government apologies for certain wrongs. In Canada, there have been at least 10 major apologies since the late 1980s. This paper reviews these apologies, and the ways they articulate with multiculturalism as a state policy. While these apologies are often considered separately, and in political terms, in this paper I argue that it is important to consider them together. To do so helps illuminate some of the political economic dynamics shaping the rise in apologies and why and how this rise in apologies is co-extensive with significant neoliberal transformations in the Canadian state, and of Canadian ways of understanding diversity.

1. Introduction

In *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (2012), Sara Ahmed offers a series of reflections based on her own experiences as a woman of colour interpellated into doing diversity work at her university in the United Kingdom, as well as a series of interviews with over 30 people in the U.K. and Australia whose job it was to enact diversity within universities. What, she asks, does 'diversity' replace? In her chapter on "The Language of Diversity", and throughout, she draws on Austin to consider the performative aspects of diversity discourse, asking not what diversity 'is' or 'means', but rather what diversity discourse does. She looks at how discourses of diversity have come to replace discourses of equity, anti-racism, and affirmative action in university, and other, settings, and talks about why 'diversity' is seen, by diversity practitioners, or those

☆ This paper developed in a rich dialogue with faculty and students from RESPECT, a Program in Multicultural Innovation at Osaka University. The University of Toronto Anthropology department has been privileged to host an summer seminar on Multiculturalism and its Critics, organized by Shiho Satsuka, and with myself, Girish Daswani and Joshua Barker, as instructors, the last two years with these interlocutors (August 2014, May 2015, May 2016), and they hosted us in June 2015. McElhinny (2016) addresses related issues, with this audience in mind. Though this article, and that one, both focus on neoliberal multiculturalism, the two papers differ in key respects. This article places apologies and multiculturalism in conversation with diversity discourse and offers more detailed linguistic accounts of apologies. The paper in Miraki Kyosei Journal has a pedagogical frame (it reports on a series of lectures, workshops and site visits around Toronto that we have prepared for the RESPECT to illustrate and/or raise questions about how multiculturalism is understood and instantiated in numerous sites), a comparative focus (with more attention to differences between Canadian multiculturalism and the notion of kyosei being elaborated at key sites in Japan), as well as more detailed information on Japanese Canadian redress (cf. Wakisaka, 2016). My thanks to three thoughtful reviewers, who provided detailed comments on this paper.

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they work for, as more appealing.[1] Diversity is seen as fresh, not tired, less abrasive, more collaborative, positive, capacious, less threatening. It challenges negative portrayals of difference, as well as certain silences around, and denials of, difference (see McElhinny, 2001 for an analysis of 'colour-blindness' in white police officers' discussions of race and affirmative action). It also is seen to move 'beyond' a focus on legal redress, which is seen as requiring and forcing compliance, to a more voluntaristic and perhaps celebratory embrace (associated with a focus on 'best practices'—see McElhinny (2012) on the related concept of 'communities of practice'). 'Diversity" suggests a collaborative vs. confrontational approach, and people working together on a shared goal. It is precisely many of these same features, Ahmed notes, that critical approaches should be wary of. Diversity often invokes a discourse of benign variation which bypasses power, history and economy to suggest a harmonious pluralism, an invocation of difference without a commitment to action or social justice, an aesthetic approach to equality, versus a focus on material inequalities. Search for "diversity" images on-line with your browser. (I do this with students in my classes at the University of Toronto.) The images are of circles, people holding hands, people holding hands in circles, people holding hands around the earth (that is, a circle), trees (same roots, many branches), and many, many boxes of crayons. Crayons of every colour. Try 'equity' and 'affirmative action' too. Less "colour." More black and white. Protest signs and marches. Scales, invoking justice out of whack.

Discourse about diversity in universities is often used to create an impression of more diversity than actually exists (see Urciuoli's rich and extended analyses [2005, 2009, 2010] of her own university). Having policies, or diversity practitioners, is in and of itself understood as performing diversity work. If "we are diverse" is seen as a claim about what universities already ARE, then those of us who report problems become the problem; we threaten the university's reputation. Diversity is a salve, "often imagined as a form of repair, a way of mending or fixing histories of being broken. Indeed, diversity enters institutional discourse as a language of reparation; as a way of imagining that those who are divided can work together" (Ahmed, 2012:164). In the U.S. and Canada, this discourse on 'diversity' appears in the late 1980s, proliferating rapidly in the 1990s. Numerous scholars, including contributors to this special issue, have shown the ways 'diversity' discourse spreads from human resource discourses in corporations to other institutions. If, however, 'diversity' has been mapped onto the changing political and economic structures that often go under the short-hand of neoliberalism, other ways of putatively mending the harms of racism appearing at precisely the same moment have not. Apologies for past injuries have proliferating in this period, but they have been understood in terms framed by national politics, rather than political economy. Various levels of Canadian government have offered at least 10 major apologies since the mid-1980s (See Appendix A). In this paper I'll begin by offering historical context on multiculturalism in Canada and the rise of apologies world-wide, considering the question of what apologies are and do, and then undertake brief analyses of five of the Canadian apologies. I'll then return to this question of why apologies are proliferating at this moment, and several different kinds of explanation. I'll suggest a political economic explanation, which takes into account the role that reconciliation can play in linking Canada to new markets, and the critical role that affect plays in both reconciliation discourses and in neoliberal transformations of self.

2. Multiculturalism in Canada

Canada is often celebrated, not least in and by the Canadian government, as the first country in the world to implement an official state multiculturalism policy and as a site where multiculturalism continues to enjoy support even as other countries (Australia, the Netherlands) retreat from earlier versions of their own official multiculturalism policies. I will provide a brief history of Canadian multicultural policy here, referring readers to more detailed histories in Abu-Laban and Gabriel (2011), Haque (2012), and Thobani (2007).[2]

The territory that Canada now occupies was originally occupied by hundreds of indigenous nations. There were two key colonizing groups in the territory that came to be called Canada, from the U.K. and France. Wars between these groups led to British victories, and Anglo dominance, until the 1960s when French Canadian nationalism surged, in complex interaction with a number of other civil rights and decolonization movements throughout the world. The government originally convened a Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, but quickly faced critique for the exclusion of other non-aboriginal Canadians. The result was the formation of a policy called multilingualism within a bilingual framework in the early 1970s (Haque, 2012). This policy was framed, as Abu-Laban and Gabriel note, within the mandate of a Keynesian welfare state (108), and included four main aspects—state funding to ethnocultural groups for cultural maintenance, removal of cultural barriers to participation in Canadian society, cultural interchange, and official language training for immigrants (108). The focus on culture was critiqued by many who saw the policy as symbolic and ineffectual in transforming power relations and addressing racism, as well as ignoring class and gender relations within communities and in the ways communities were articulated with the Canadian state. While multiculturalism was rapidly embraced by political parties and the leaders of ethnic minority associations, French Canadians (especially those in Quebec) tended to see it as weakening their claims on the

[1] The ways diversity maps onto the transition from an always unevenly applied Keynesian welfare state to a neoliberal one is neatly mapped out, for Canada, by *Selling Diversity* (Abu-Laban and Gabriel, 2011), a richly detailed state and institutional history of the transformation of immigration, multiculturalism and employment equity policies over the last half of the 20th century and in the early part of the 21st. They track the transition from state regulated discourses of equity (though the ability to enforce was always uneven) to voluntaristic discourses of diversity in Ontario, and federally.

[2] For other histories and critiques of multiculturalism in Canada, see, Chazan et al. (2011), Haque (2012), and Thobani (2007).