
Heterogeneous Nations/Heterogeneous Citizens: The National Face in the Twenty-First Century

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Every country is supposed to have a national myth and, presumably, a national image, or face. For the renowned eighteenth-century German philosopher, theologian, and literary critic Johann Gottfried Herder—the supposed “father of . . . the *Volksgeist*” (Berlin 145)—the reason the nation is the most natural collective unit is that it’s really “an extended family” (Herder 324). Herder of course envisaged the family as not only sharing the same language but also being ethnically homogeneous. But what happens to a family, or nation, when its members vary phenotypically? Does it still possess a quintessential face, or does its heterogeneity demand that we reconsider the widespread belief that a nation necessarily has a distinct human image? Because of the mass migration of peoples around the globe at least since the mid-twentieth century, to say nothing of internal variation, most countries today cannot even pretend that they’re ethnically uniform. Yet the myth of the national physiognomy persists, both outside and within countries. People continue to believe that they know what a Brazilian, an Indian, or a Swede looks like. But if one closely examined those populations, it wouldn’t be nearly so self-evident. As I will argue in my paper, focusing particularly on Canada, one of the great challenges of our time is not only to accept that humanity is diverse but that so are many nation-states—indeed, families.

Canada, as you know, sits at the northern end of the Americas. Because the Arctic makes up so much of its landmass, and it experiences a prolonged winter, it’s often described as the Great White North. Whiteness, however, doesn’t refer just to the snowy landscape but also to the populace. In the late 1990s, the future Canadian Parliamentary Poet Laureate George Elliott Clarke published an essay titled “White like Canada,” in which he maintains that his homeland’s dominant ethnocultural groups “have never had a vision of Canada as anything but a white man’s country” (106 [show his photo]). Clarke, who is of African descent, elsewhere contends that Canadians like to see themselves as “a nation of good, Nordic, ‘pure,’ mainly White folks, as opposed to the lawless, hot-tempered, impure, mongrel Americans” (Foreword xii). The whiteness of Canada is clearly reflected in the faces of its most influential writers. Toward the end of the twentieth century, the lists of the “greatest” Canadian authors in English usually included such figures as Margaret Atwood, Robertson Davies, Margaret Laurence, and the 2013 recipient of the Nobel Prize for

Literature, Alice Munro [**show photos of Atwood, Davies, Laurence, and Munro**]. Those writers actually are not only white but also of Anglo-Celtic and Protestant stock. According to the novelist Matt Cohen, they all belong to “a conservative, small-town, restrained, Protestant tradition that found a tremendous echo of self-recognition across the country,” and “were, in effect, writing the secret diaries of their readers” (157-58). In other words, they owe much of their appeal to Canadian readers to the fact they’re perceived as being part of the national family.

Needless to say, such uniformly Caucasian faces are not truly representative of Canadian demographics, or of Canadian literature for that matter. Like other American countries, Canada has a significant Indigenous populace and writers like Tomson Highway, Eden Robinson, and Katherena Vermette have made a concerted effort to remind other Canadians and the world of their presence, as well as of their continuing cultural and political vitality. The Canadianness of Canada’s Indigenous peoples obviously cannot be contested, even if they haven’t long been considered full Canadian citizens, or citizens at all. Whatever else they may be, they’re moulded by the geography and history of what is now Canada.

This right to belong in Canada, though, has not always been extended to so-called visible minorities, who historically have had to struggle to ensure their place in the country. As the Quebec playwright Lorena Gale captures this reality in her poetic memoir *Je me souviens*, or I Remember (Quebec’s official motto): “When people ask me which island I come from,/ I say Montreal. And they look confused./ When people tell me to go back where I came/ from, I look confused” (9). A similar view is articulated by the West Coast poet and novelist Joy Kogawa. While describing the experiences of the protagonist of her novel *Obasan*, she writes that “the one sure-fire question” that the school teacher Naomi Nakane can expect when she meets people, including her own students, is where she comes from, since everyone presumes that she’s “a foreigner” (7). Kogawa’s 1981 novel is arguably the most cogent exploration of the whiteness of Canadian citizenship and, by extension, of Canada’s national face. Centred on the ignoble treatment of Canadians of Japanese origin during the Second World War, when they were forcibly removed from a broad strip along the Pacific coast, *Obasan* documents the “desperation” of people born in Canada “to prove themselves Canadians” (33; see also Kogawa and Wilson 286). It could be argued that the animus toward Japanese Canadians by various levels of Canadian government, and Canadians in general, was a consequence of the fact that Canada was at war with Japan. Thus, as Naomi’s brother Stephen remarks, Japanese Canadians became caught in “a riddle We are both the enemy and not the enemy” (76). Yet at the time Canada was also at war with Germany and Naomi can’t help but notice that the ever more numerous demonstrators “are so much more vehement about Canadian-born Japanese than they are about German-born Germans,” which leads her to conclude that this is due to the fact “we look different. What it boils down to is an undemocratic racial antagonism” (88). Or to phrase it differently, most Canadians have more affinities with Germans and other “white foreigners” (102) than they do with people of Japanese descent, even if they were born and raised in the country.

Admittedly, Canada’s self-image has changed considerably since the 1940s. The most notable

of these developments is the Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988, the Canadian government's official policy to "recognize and promote the understanding that multiculturalism reflects the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society and acknowledge[] the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage" (3(1)). No less a figure than the current Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, told the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2017 that, although "Canada remains a work in progress," it now accepts that it is "a country built on different cultures, different religions, different languages all coming together." As he underlined, "diversity has become our great strength." The transformation of the idea of Canada is certainly evident in the emergence of writers like Highway, Gale, Kogawa, and Priscila Uppal [**show their photos**], whom I'll discuss shortly. Yet there are indications that the perception that the Canadian face is Caucasian hasn't quite vanished.

The relationship between a literature and the nation in which it is produced is necessarily conflicted, since literature both legitimizes the nation and exposes its shortcomings. So perhaps it shouldn't come as a surprise that Canadian literature often reveals that Canada's multicultural vision hasn't been embraced by a sizable portion of the citizenry, including writers. For instance, in a 2018 essay, the fiction writer and poet Pasha Malla details how the country's most important prize for literary humour, the Leacock Medal, "has never been awarded to a person of colour" since its inception in 1947 (14). Malla's explanation for this statistical aberration is that the ostensibly national award "has succeeded less at celebrating the breadth of our nation's comedic writing than in substantiating a set of culturally exclusive tropes by lionizing books mostly written by a subset of our population to mollify people just like them" (15). Again, contrary to what Kogawa's Naomi Nakane maintains, not "[e]verything a Canadian does is Canadian" (61), for some Canadians are deemed to be more representative of the "national" way of life than others. If one needed more proof of this reality, one would simply have to read a much-discussed recent study of the 1960s Canadian literature Boom in which virtually every canonical work of the most significant "literary explosion" in Canadian history (Mount 5) happens to be authored by someone of European background.

The persistence of the whiteness of the Canadian face, however, is particularly manifest in literary texts, such as Jane Urquhart's *Sanctuary Line*. Published in 2010, Urquhart's novel is set on the multi-generational Butler apple orchard on the north shore of Lake Erie, right across from Ohio. Of Irish extraction, the Butlers have branches on both sides of the international line. In fact, the current owner, Stan Butler, is married to a US cousin named Sadie. Stan is a dynamic and innovative orchardist and the farm has become very successful. At the same time, he has become heavily dependent on temporary Mexican farm workers, under the supervision of his foreman Dolores. Actually, the main crisis in the novel, which will culminate in the collapse of the Butler orchard, occurs when Sadie returns unexpectedly from a visit to her Ohio relatives in the middle of the night and catches Stan and Dolores in bed. Most germane in terms of my subject, we then learn that Dolores's teenaged son Teo, who's described throughout the narrative as "the Mexican boy"

(36 ff.), is Stan's child (264-66). Tellingly, even after members of the family acknowledge that Teo shares their "genetic inheritance" (265)—that is, that he's a Butler—no one ever refers to him as a Canadian. His "brown eyes" and "brown hands" (2, 7) appear to preclude the possibility of his truly belonging in the land of the Maple Leaf. Not surprisingly, when Teo gets killed in a car accident in the aftermath of Sadie's discovery of Stan's affair with Dolores, his body is promptly returned to Mexico. Teo thus forever leaves his father's homeland, the country where he had never been able to envisage a future for himself except as a labourer (222-23).

Uppal's depiction of the Canadian face in her memoir *Projection: Encounters with My Runaway Mother* is remarkably different from Urquhart's but no less revealing. A prolific poet, fiction writer, and playwright, Uppal is the offspring of an Indian-born Canadian civil servant and of the daughter of a Brazilian military attaché to the Brazilian Embassy in Ottawa. When Uppal was two-years-old and her brother was three, their father "swallowed contaminated water during a sailboat accident in Antigua" and was rendered "a quadriplegic" (Uppal 3, 4). Their mother was unable to adjust to her new situation and six years later abandoned her husband and children and "fled" to her native Brazil, "draining all the money from the [family's] bank accounts" (5). In *Projection* Uppal relates her trip to South America to meet the truant parent she hadn't seen in nearly twenty years. Mother and daughter never really reconnect, interestingly in part because they come to see each other not as individuals but as representatives of their birthplaces, with each of them repeatedly trying to demonstrate that her particular polity is superior to the other's (155-57).

Early on, Uppal's mother warns her about the dangers of being mugged in São Paulo, since Brazilians will think she hails from the United States. "Everyone will assume you are an American," explains her mother. "No one knows what a Canadian looks like. They will take the chance that they are robbing an American" (67; emphasis in the original). Presumably, Uppal knows what her compatriots look like. She's very much a post-Multiculturalism Act Canadian, someone who, like her immigrant father, "love[s]" the policy's architect, former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau (157). She's such a patriot that she discloses that even in her teens, the one day she "didn't like to work was Canada Day" and that, in truth, she "felt more Canadian than part of a family" (194). Interestingly, this is not how Uppal is perceived after she lands in Brazil. On the contrary, she remarks, "No one here thinks I'm anything but Brazilian when they set their eyes upon me. . . . With my exotic mixed heritage, my abundant curly black hair and olive complexion, high Indian cheekbones, and my penchant for vintage clothing and party hats, I am not used to this, and find it liberating to blend in" (69; see also Braz 113). The inescapable implication is that this is something that doesn't happen in Canada, that her face is not usually likened to that of her homeland.

Uppal's unexpected disclosure that she looks Brazilian, not Canadian, underscores how common still is the idea that Canada's national face is white, a view that incidentally is shared by people of all sorts of ethnoracial backgrounds. It's worth noting that "Canajun Blacks" like Lorena Gale are reproached for identifying themselves as Canadian not just by white Canadians but also by other blacks, who see their claim to Canadianness as proof that they don't know where they "come from"

or who they are (Gale 9). As a West Indian woman admonishes Gale, she's "assimilated," being "Black on de outside, White on the inside" (9). No less significant, after he asserts that writers like Atwood, Davies, Munro, and Laurence were able to earn "a dominant place in the Canadian public imagination" partly because of their ethnicity (157), the Jewish Matt Cohen proceeds to state that in the 1970s Laurence was considered not only "the best" Canadian writer, "the most universal," but also "the most Canadian" (179-80). As he recalls his jubilant reaction to the publication of Laurence's best known novel, "*The Stone Angel* was something else This is *Canadian!* I kept muttering to myself" (180; emphasis in the original). Again, Canadianness seems to be linked to a particular ethnicity.

In the end, while the notion of national physiognomies has long been dismissed as a "pseudo-science" (Flavell 8), or "race science" (Rentschler 231), the persistence of the belief that countries have homogeneous faces suggests that it remains a potent cultural and psychological force in the twenty-first century. Margaret Laurence, for one, insists that a country like Canada is a family but "a very varied family" ("Listen" 23). Yet, judging by Canadian literature, this diversity is far from being universally embraced, even—or especially—by Canadians. Of course what Canadian literature also demonstrates is the constructedness of ethnocultural identity, since categories like whiteness turn out to be extremely fluid. This is illustrated by Laurence herself. As noted, she's often perceived as the embodiment of Canada, a country whose face is supposed to be white. Yet in her account of a bus trip that she takes from a small central Ontario town to Toronto, Laurence shows that her whiteness was not at all transparent, despite her "Scots-Irish" ancestry (22). Since the bus was crowded, she had to share a seat with an older woman named Bertha, who was "sloshed" ("Letter" 358). Bertha became irritated with the fact Laurence was reading a book, which she interpreted as a sign that her travelling companion was a foreigner (Show photo of Laurence). As Bertha accosted Laurence, "I know what *you* are! You are one of those damn boat people from Vietnam or Taiwan! That's what you are. Boat people! One of *them*. Why did we let you all in? Wha language you speak, parn my curiosity? Chinese? Vie-nam-eez? Yer trying to learn English, eh?" (359; emphasis in the original). When Laurence replied that she was Canadian, Bertha immediately retorted, "I shoulda' known. Yer a halfbreed, one of those goddamn halfbreeds. Admit it! You are!" (360). To be fair, given her state of inebriation, Bertha was probably not the best judge of either human character or physiognomy. Nevertheless, the fact Bertha doesn't think that Laurence fits the national image suggests that the Canadian family is much more varied than the paradigm allows.

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