Turning Points in Toronto: Musings on the RESPECT Students' Summer School Engagement with Cultural Diversity in Canada

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She stood there with a fragility one could instantly recognize had arisen out of the experiences of the life story she was recounting. Tears poured down her face as she explained how she had deliberately separated herself from her family to come and work in Canada so that her family could have a better life. Her teenage son was now a stranger to her. The time she should have been able to spend raising him had been spent raising other people's sons and daughters.

She was a live in caregiver from the Philippines who had come to Canada in the hope of permanent residency. The hope had been drowned amidst a sea of bureaucratic red tape; instead she had become a virtual slave, trapped by the system and unable to earn enough to support her family back home in the Philippines.

This was the summer of 2014 and the RESPECT students, listening to her story, were on a two-week Summer School at the University of Toronto investigating Canada's policy of multiculturalism to see how it might relate to their own studies of "Mirai-Kyosei" (共生), co-existence. They were visiting the Philippine Women's Centre housed in the basement of the Magkaisa Centre. In Tagalog, "magkaisa" means "unity".

On the web site of the government of Canada's department of "Citizenship and Immigration Canada" (CIC) the idea of unity is expressed thus, *"Canadian multiculturalism is fundamental to our belief that all citizens are equal. Multiculturalism ensures that all citizens can keep their identities, can take pride in their ancestry and have a sense of belonging. Acceptance gives Canadians a feeling of security and self-confidence, making them open to, and accepting of, diverse cultures. The Canadian experience has shown that multiculturalism encourages racial and ethnic harmony and cross-cultural*

understanding. (http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/department/index.asp)

After spending only a few days in Toronto, the RESPECT students were beginning to realize that when it came to this so-called "model society of cultural pluralism", the ideals of a unified multicultural society in which all cultures could co-exist with equal status and opportunity seemed more like "an empty box".

The RESPECT Summer School on "Multiculturalism in Canada" has been running for two years now under the sub-heading, "Critical Engagements with Diversity and Inequality." To that end, Professor Bonnie McElhinney introducing the critiques of multiculturalism in Canada, announced in her opening lecture, "*One could suggest that, in looking at the different ways of implementation that take place, the problem is implementation: that people just need to do it better than they've been doing it before. But some people believe that the notion of multiculturalism in and of itself is a flawed way to structure thinking about diversity in Canada*." In addition, Professor Shiho Satsuka, the coordinator of the course, reiterated a common discourse by stating, "*Canada's multiculturalism has been developed in relation to settler colonialism and moreover, recently, globalized capitalism*."

Canada was one of the first countries in the world to make multiculturalism an official policy. What better place, than Canada, for the RESPECT students to fulfill the six literacies of the required multicultural competencies set out in the principles of the

RESPECT program (multilingual literacy, communication literacy, policy literacy, research literacy, global literacy, fieldwork literacy) in order to train them as "*multicultural innovators, able to tackle issues related to a multicultural coexistence*". (http://www.respect.osaka-u.ac.jp/en/)

Surely, here in Canada the RESPECT students could learn how to promote multicultural coexistence back in Japan. Surely, here in Toronto with its culturally diverse neighborhoods they could witness a unity in diversity, a mosaic rather than a melting pot, coexistence practiced without malice, tolerance elevated to acceptance with equality being the guiding force. And yet, within a few days of arriving their hopes had been shattered, exposed as mere illusions, hoodwinked by official jargon that had placed this policy on a pedestal as a beacon to inspire the world. They might as well return to Japan, mission unaccomplished, hand back their scholarships and explain to the Ministry of Affairs and Communications that the notion of multicultural coexistence was a doomed concept.

There had been initial skepticism among some of the students that certain critiques of the policy of multiculturalism in Canada were too negative, bordering on the paranoid. In one of the readings given to the students to prepare for the course, Sunera Thobani writes,

> "*…the immigrant who longs for acceptance into the national fold…is perpetually required to prove her/his divestment of the negative elements of her/his cultural self. The fear of 'slipping' back into the 'fresh off the boat' behavior, of lapsing into the thicker 'immigrant' accent, remains a constant possibility, an ongoing danger against which one is required to remain vigilant. These racial subjects are under constant white surveillance, that watches for just such a slip, just such a gesture, that will confirm what the 'knowing' national subject always already knows: 'they are all like that'…*".[1]

Certainly such an extreme statement, without accompanying evidence, undermines the

[1] (Thobani, Sunera. 2007. *Exalted Subjects: Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada.* Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, Chapter 4: "Multiculturalism and the Liberalizing Nation" p.171).

argument that the multicultural policy in Canada masks a white supremacist society, privileging whites at the expense of others, but as the days unfolded and the students were exposed to the conditions under which certain groups exist in Toronto a growing sense of disillusionment began to take hold.

The turning point, in 2014, was the fieldtrips to the Philippine Women's Centre and the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto. In the former the students learned about the 'Live-In Caregiver Program' (LCP), which was described as a stygian den of discrimination, exploitation and abuse. Vulnerable Philippine women come to Canada with the promise of permanent residency but end up a captive workforce for the affluent middle class.

The RESPECT students heard stories of exploitation, harassment and abuse: live-in caregivers who worked long hours for less than the minimum wage, seven days a week with no holidays; some subjected to insults, threats and even sexual abuse but with no recourse to report violations out of fear of reprisals as they were made to believe that they had no rights and could easily be deported. The Philippine Women's Centre was set up, with no assistance from the government, to provide support and information for Philippine workers to lobby for the removal of the "live-in" requirement and for landed status to be granted on arrival. As, Joy Sioson, the chairperson of PWC explained, "*We are not commodities, we are human beings."*

Remarkably, two months after the RESPECT students left Toronto the government of Ontario removed the live-in requirement to qualify for permanent residency in an overhaul of the program that went into effect on November 30th, 2014. The Immigration Minister, Chris Alexander told a news conference in Toronto, "*We are saying to the whole Canadian population, to caregivers above all, the time of abuse and vulnerability is over.*" (October 31st, 2014).

At the same time the government created two new categories whereby caregivers could seek permanent residency: one for child-care providers, the other for those working as health-care aides. A cap of 2,750 applications per year, to begin in 2015, was placed under each category to be processed within six months. However, this reform was criticized by the "Caregivers' Action Centre" who pointed out that setting a cap reduced the number of eligible live-in care workers who had previously been guaranteed permanent residency. On August 30th, 2015 they gave a press conference to expose what they described as, "the lies and discriminatory immigration polices" of the Conservative government. (http://caregiversactioncentre.org)

It remains to be seen if the new Liberal government, under Justin Trudeau, which toppled the Conservatives in the October 19th federal election, 2015, will honor their promise to reform the permanent residency system and if so, how it might benefit the live-in caregivers who for too long have been the victims of lies and exploitation.

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Unfortunately, the history of settler colonialism in Canada appears to be based on lies and exploitation, as the RESPECT students were made painfully aware during their fieldtrip to the Native Canadian Centre in Toronto. Here they learnt about the government sponsored Christian schools known as "Residential Schools" which were established to assimilate Aboriginal children into white European culture, effectively "to kill the Indian in the child".

On June 11th, 2008, then Prime Minister Stephen Harper made an official apology recognizing that the "*two primary objectives of the residential school system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture.*" However many Aboriginal people felt that this apology was merely a symbolic gesture with nothing concrete being put into place to alleviate the ongoing problems faced by the children and grandchildren of the residential school pupils. Their culture had indeed been cruelly erased from their identity and it seems the indigenous peoples of Canada now have no place within the so-called multicultural mosaic of Canadian society. The cultural genocide continues to the extent that this once visible majority has become an invisible minority.

During the 2015 Summer School, one of the RESPECT students of Okinawan origin was able to draw a parallel between the experiences of the indigenous people of Canada and the Okinawan people, especially after watching a documentary about Residential Schools in Canada. He explained that Okinawa was originally called the

"Ryukyu Kingdom" (琉球王国Ryūkyū Ōkoku; in Okinawan: 琉球國 Ruuchuu-kuku) but was annexed by Japan in 1879. From that time the Okinawan people had to speak Japanese while their own Ryukyuan language was denigrated to merely a dialect of Japanese. In schools, pupils were punished if they accidently spoke a few Okinawan words and were humiliated by being forced to hang a dialect card (方言札 *hōgen* fuda) around their necks, as was also the case on mainland Japan for pupils who used regional dialects in schools.

Many Okinawans would argue that there was definitely a policy to "kill the Ryukyuan in the child" and force them to become Japanese, a policy which proved useful later when the Japanese needed to swell the numbers of their fighting forces during the war. Masahide Ota, governor of Okinawa (1990-1998) writes about Japanese atrocities against Okinawan citizens and details how during the Battle of Okinawa (沖縄戦 Okinawa-sen) Japanese troops executed over a thousand Okinawans for the crimes of attempting to surrender or speaking the Ryukyuan language.

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The question of identity and the idea of home was an important component of this summer school as it was asking the questions as to whether multiculturalism in Canada was a means of eradicating identity, a melting pot instead of the mosaic it is supposed to be, or the means of establishing a uniquely Canadian identity, in which being asked the question, "Where are you from?" could be perceived as an insult: the children of immigrants are from Canada and want to be identified as Canadians, not some hyphenated-hybrid.

But what is a true Canadian? Has diversity been sacrificed at the altar of a white Canadian identity? Neil Bissondath, the Trinidadian-Canadian author, in his book "Selling Illusions: the Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada" suggests the opposite, claiming the policy of multiculturalism has encouraged people to stick with their own kind creating ghettoes in which people follow their own cultures and he criticizes the idea of the mosaic suggesting that it encourages exoticism, highlighting the differences that divide Canadians

rather than the similarities that unite them.

There seemed to be an aspect of that when the RESPECT students visited a Ghanaian Pentecostal Church but, under the tutelage of Professor Girish Daswani who was focusing on the cultural complexities of transnationalism in relation to religion, the RESPECT students could appreciate the notion that while their Pentecostal faith acted as a channel to maintain the black congregation's link with their home in Ghana it also allowed them to establish their "spiritual" home anywhere in the world in unity with likewise believers. The pastor of the church claimed that their Christian identity was more important than their Ghanaian identity, at the same time he also looked forward to the day when he might return to Ghana.

The concept of home will always remain in the consciousness of a diaspora and a society that wishes to embrace diversity has to protect that identification. The question is whether Canada's policy of multiculturalism dilutes that connection by merely celebrating

the externals of diverse cultures while inconspicuously conducting a mass cultural genocide resulting in a single Canadian identity that has its basis in settler colonialism and may even instill within people a desire to distance themselves from their own ancestral roots.

The RESPECT students were thus faced with a dilemma. Was there anything salvageable from their experiences in Toronto that they could bring back to Japan to further their understanding of multicultural coexistence? They had been bombarded with the suggestions that multiculturalism might be a flawed way to structure thinking about diversity, that it was a mask for the dominance of a white European culture, that it focused on the externals of culture and not on the needs of communities, particularly low-income, working class communities, that it excluded indigenous peoples. If multiculturalism was a flawed way to structure thinking about diversity, what about the concept of "mirai-kyosei" (共生), rather crudely translated as "coexistence"? After all, it is possible to "coexist" without mutual admiration or acceptance wherein tolerance becomes merely a resigned "putting up with" the other.

In 2014 the RESPECT students were rather vague in their attempts to convey in English what they understood by the concept of "mirai kyosei". Furthermore, they left Canada with a pessimistic vision of the future. Perhaps the concept of "mirai-kyosei" was another "empty box" bobbing up and down in jargon infested waters of misplaced ideals.

By the following year all the students on the RESPECT program had a much clearer understanding of the concept, brought about mostly through the hands-on practical work of the "project learning" component of the program. They had been helping non-Japanese pupils at "Osaka City Minami Elementary School" (大阪市立南小学校), a school dedicated to ensuring that children from immigrant families could succeed within the Japanese education system. They had also been working in a community development project in a small town located in Ibaraki City, Osaka called "Toyokawa" (豊川), which had suffered from a long history of social discrimination against the invisible minority, the effects of which can still be observed in the levels of poverty that remain.

These experiences, coupled with the added tours in Toronto to the Kingston-Galloway/Orton Park priority neighborhood and the "Point" and "East Scarborough

Storefront" community centers and followed by ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Toronto's most famous multicultural neighborhood, "Kensington Market", provided another turning point. Through their own empirical research, the RESPECT students could now piece together points of contact between Canada's policy of multiculturalism and Japan's concept of coexistence. They were also able to discern more astutely the differences between them. Moreover, while still mindful of the critiques, they were a little more optimistic that in both there was something more salvageable than a box of empty platitudes.

There was also a renewed confidence that the RESPECT program's principle of looking "*beyond issues of nationalities, ethnicities, languages and religion…to the intersection of factors such as gender difference, generation gaps, health status and disability*" could be justified as a more comprehensive way to structure thinking about diversity but only if it actively moved out of the theoretical and strived to construct working models that avoided the pitfalls into which Canada's policy of multiculturalism had fallen.