



Canadian Voice of Colour Emerges

By Dr. Lorne Foster

In the next century, Arnold Itwaru and Colin Ninvalle will undoubtedly be recognized as the founders of a visible minority intellectual tradition in Canada.

With Itwaru's *Negative Ecstasy* (published by Other Eye) and now Ninvalle's *Stereotypes* (recently published by Toucan) we finally have the first articulation of an intellectual "voice of colour" in Canada that reflects minority sensibilities and a global vision. In this discourse, negative ecstasy is the place where people of colour are held hostage to the stereotypical delusions of a mass-mediated social reality.

In a remarkable division of labour, these scholars (both equally remarkably originating from Guyana) have created what could be called the dialectic of "Star Trek and the Jane-Finch Corridor" to explore a new media-generated racial imperialism. In this dialectic, instead of an affirmative of contemporary life that legitimates the dynamic richness and resonance of diversity, mass media technology configures social reality in a way that facilitates White privilege and hegemony, and can only lead to a one-dimensional world that stifles a multicultural and multi-dimensional humanity. According to Itwaru and Ninvalle, then, in the search for authenticity, the first intellectual undertaking for people of colour in the new technological colonialism is to learn to distinguish and separate their mere disadvantage from the very negation of their self.

In short, together Itwaru and Ninvalle depict the person of colour acting in the Western world on the basis of an intellectual integrity that seeks to clarify the relationship between the minority self and society -- for both the society and the minority. In so doing, they have given shape to a brand new and unique discovery of "the person of colour as an interlocutor in the Western world", and have paved the way for the first bonafide Canadian visible minority social theory.

This is not to say, of course, that other Canadian visible minority scholars over the years have failed or neglected to produce meaningful works about visible minorities. The scholastic achievements of people of colour about people of colour in Canada are both varied and noteworthy. But visible minority scholars and intellectuals have never been regarded as being part of a distinct tradition emanating from a comprehensive school of thought or social theory. This is mainly because they tend(ed) to operate within a small corner of the established European intellectual tradition -- either mimicking it or otherwise attempting to somehow appeal to its conscience.

Consider, even when scholars of colour have explored the everyday worlds of coloured folk, like railway porters and such, it has seldom been for the benefit or edification of everyday coloured folk, but rather, for the White intellectual establishment. Here, society is not clarified for people of colour, people of colour are clarified for society. So, the sociology of Canadian railway porters is considered a "classic" bit of sociology today precisely because the dominant

idea-culture is titillated and sometimes even moved by a view of the “backstage” (behind the main curtain, so to speak) in the drama of Canadian history and social reality – from those minorities who died laying down the track across Canada, to those who served the refreshments on the trip.

This, again, is not meant as an indictment, nor is it limited to Canadian intellectual race relations. In fact, there has long been a school of thought in the United States among many Black intellectuals, that you are always writing for a particular audience, and so, as a scholar you can either address White people or you can address people of colour, but never both audiences at the same time.

In this view, Richard Wright’s “Invisible Man” and James Baldwin’s “Fire Next Time” (to cite but two examples) are (also) classic works written by two extraordinarily talented intellects of colour that appeal to the conscience and morality of the dominant White majority, and are not particularly meant to inform Black people about (being socially invisible and mentally enraged) something they already and intimately know.

In this view, the conventional success of intellectuals of colour anywhere in the Western world has always been correlated to the compromises they have been willing to make to appeal to the dominant intellectual power structure. Those writers of colour who consciously or even unconsciously conform to the conventional standards and relevances of the “White audience” tend to have the most conventional success (in being published, in getting better jobs, even in the procurement of recognition, accolades and awards). The more uncompromising scholars of colour are in their ideas and their work, the less contemporaneous success they tend to achieve.

Now, for the first time, we have another serious view.

Itwaru’s and Ninvalle’s work are the first attempts in Canada to defy or overcome the one-race-audience perspective by attempt to move the voices of colour, radiating from the corridors of Jane-Finch, to the front-stage in Canadian history, as a bonafide participants in the Western discourse on the so-called rational models of how people relate to society.

Specifically, at the structural-level, Itwaru intricately dissects the mass media’s control of knowledge in the West, as the fundamental dimension in the exercise of power and the foundation of a new racial imperialism. While at the everyday-level, Ninvalle painstakingly fleshes out the attendant symbolic equations in Western society that serve to marginalize, infantilize, tokenize, victimize, and otherwise deceptively seduce people of colour into submission as caricatures of themselves. Together, Itwaru’s *Negative Ecstasy* and Ninvalle’s *Stereotypes* represent a compelling unity of the contemporary techno-ideological imperialism and the constricting historical materialism that configures and disaffects the everyday visible minority life.

Together, they also represent the beginnings of a new kind of uncompromising synthesis, that frankly, no other serious observers thought possible – social theory that tries to speak to “both” visible minorities and the dominant majority; and paves the way for the first bonafide, face-to-face, minority-majority, intellectual conversation.

Let’s all wish them both the greatest of success.