

## **Multiculturalism and Its (Usual) Discontents**

By George Elliott Clarke

George Elliott Clarke teaches African-Canadian literature at the University of Toronto. A prize-winning poet and novelist, his latest books are *I & I*, a verse-novel, and *Blues and Bliss: The Poetry of George Elliott Clarke*, selected by Jon Paul Fiorentino, and recipient of the 2009 Eric Hoffer Book Award for Poetry.

### **SUPPORTING THE FEDERALIST OPTION**

We know that multiculturalism was promulgated to pacify the non-Anglo and non-French ethnicities who were not deemed to have been central to the establishment of the Canadian State. Of course, Prime Minister Trudeau's 1971 pronouncement of the program of official Federal Government multiculturalism was intended to ensure that ethnic minorities across Canada and especially in Quebec would support the federalist option in the then-looming contest with revitalized and populist/socialist Quebecois nationalism. The Anglo-Federal 'camp' could hardly afford to have ethnic minorities siding with Francophone Quebecois in any potential battle over Quebec sovereignty. Indeed, the October Crisis of the previous year, which saw the Front de Liberation du Quebec, attempt a Fanonian/Front de Liberation Nationale guerilla warfare model imported from Algeria (with rhetoric from the U.S. Black Panther Party to boot) had served notice that the Canadian State should prevent potential alliances from developing between disenfranchised Quebecois and disempowered ethnic minorities and immigrants.

At the same time, the promulgation of Federal official bilingualism in 1969, which had the effect of not only making French and English official languages but also of making ethnic

Francophones and ethnic Anglophones *de facto* official majoritarian ethnicities, also meant that the less 'official' linguistic and ethnic minorities had to be placated and 'recognized.' Also crucial to the 1971 birth of federal multiculturalism was the conflict between the Federal Government and Aboriginal peoples, which had assumed new life in the wake of the 1970 attempt by the Trudeau Government to unilaterally assimilate First Nations peoples by depriving them of treaty rights, reserves, and their own national affiliations by rendering them 'Canadians.' The Aboriginal response was to reject the notion that they were 'ethnicities' like other Canadians; while Quebecois nationalists articulated a policy of 'interculturalism' meaning, in essence, that while Quebec would respect minority ethnicities, these parties would have to accept a degree of partial assimilation, becoming Quebecois. (While some commentators view 'interculturalism' as coercive, it should be noted that multiculturalism operates similarly in the rest-of-Canada: minority cultures are 'respected,' but folks are also encouraged to assimilate to 'Canadian' norms.)

#### MULTICULTURALISM: A STATE SOLUTION

It's worthwhile to remember that multiculturalism was a State solution to the perceived problem of 'national unity,' and so the program and policy was always deeply political. Naturally, ethnic minority elites saw the advantages of grabbing hold of some of their own tax dollars, now being returned to them, to build economic and political bases for themselves while also promoting their own cultures to other Canadians as well as within their own communities. This sensible development led to the rise of 'song-and-dance multiculturalism,' as some have decried it. It also meant that these same ethnic minority elites were able to win favours, especially from the governing Federal Liberal Party, in exchange for the delivery of the 'ethnocultural'

communities' votes on 'E-day.' This politics was also sensible, for it had meant the extension to all of Canada of the same Francophone ethnic (and Catholic-connected) politics that the Liberal Party had used in Quebec.

So, the history of the program/policy reminds us that multiculturalism is a pure product / project of the Canadian State, especially in its Liberal/liberal colourings. From the beginning, critics, literally left and right, have charged that it reduces Canadian unity by promoting 'hyphenated Canadianism,' thus reducing assimilation; that it avoids and occludes the discussion of racism; that it is bourgeois and is aimed at unifying ethnic minority bourgeoisies at the expense of the common cause of labour (however defined); that it increases social disputes by seeking to protect and preserve minority cultures as opposed to forcing them to adopt 'Canadian values' and 'practices.'

The criticisms are justified, and they have enjoyed elegant elaboration elsewhere. I agree with the critics—the left-leaning ones to be precise. But I also would like them to recognize the truly radical potential of multiculturalism—at least in theory—at least in Canada.

## RADICAL POTENTIAL

First, we must recognize that multiculturalism represented the first public acknowledgment by the Canadian State that ethnic Anglos and ethnic Francos were not the only Canadians. For the first time, the Federal Government addressed ethnocultural minority-group Canadians as *citizens* with a direct relationship to government. Previously, the federal Government had only recognized ethnocultural and racial minority groups in Canada if they constituted a 'problem'—

West Coast Chinese and Japanese, Prairie black settlers, Eastern and Southern European immigrants (including Jews). Thus, it was indeed a progressive step when the Canadian State began to accept these 'others' as bona fide citizens (even if still 'not as Canadian' as the 'Founding Fathers'). Indeed, if the Official Languages Act finally told Francophones that the Federal Government recognized their distinct status as citizens, multiculturalism was intended to extend the same consideration to the non-majoritarian ethnicities. In its wake, then, Ed Schreyer—a Ukrainian-Canadian—could be appointed Governor-General and Bora Laskin could head the Supreme Court of Canada. Furthermore, the inner logic of multiculturalism means that marginalized citizens may now expect to share at least vicariously in power by filling 'symbolic' posts such as Governor-General or Lieutenant-Governor.

Secondly, but just as importantly, while some of the early Federal multicultural dollars went to feel-good festivals and the like, some of the money—yes, even if only a pittance—went to fund newspapers, magazines, radio shows, TV shows, and, crucially, literary anthologies. We can date the arrival of contemporary Canadian literature as an academic and cultural fact with the discovery of Austin Clarke as a Canadian novelist (not a displaced Barbadian writer) as well as the appearance of anthologies of Jewish, Arab, Black, Chinese, Japanese, Italian, and other ethnocultural minority writing, as of the mid-1970s. It is striking to note that Michael Ondaatje was first perceived as an exotic Canadian writer, but, by the later 1990s, was beginning to be relocated as an Asian-Canadian author too.

While some critics may view such anthologies and other cultural, canon-building initiatives as constituting the song-and-dance multiculturalism of ethnic elites, it is still the case that these

publications were progressive in establishing, usually, the Canadianness of a minority group, while also permitting them to access and understand and align themselves with the experiences of other minority intellectuals. That *Roman Candles*, an Italian-Canadian poetry anthology edited by Pier Giorgio Di Cicco, and *Canada In Us Now*, an African-Canadian anthology edited by Herald Head, appeared so close to each other meant that it was possible for intellectuals from either group to begin to draw instructive connections between them. (Indeed, it may be the case that di Cicco felt inspired to tackle Italian-Canadian anthologizing because of the example of Head's African-Canadian text.)

Thirdly, various experiences of racism and exclusion could now be compared more easily, from the Africville Relocation to the Japanese-Canadian internment, from the Jewish refugee Voyage of the Damned (when Jews fleeing Nazi Germany were refused entry to Canada) to the Komagata Maru Incident as well as the Chinese Head Tax or even the Acadian Deportation. Multiculturalism helped to make it possible for marginalized-group intellectuals to network with like-minded others from outside their own cultural traditions.

#### A POSITIVE STEP FORWARD

Yes, MUCH more remains to be done—including dethroning the British Head of State. Canada is still not yet a truly egalitarian, multiracial and multicultural state. But multiculturalism, even in its liberal, statist guise, has been a positive step forward. It has served—and can serve—to expand the inclusive sense of the term *Canadian*.