Reflections from a Visitor:

On Being From Canada Without *Looking*Canadian

It was at dinner one night not long after I began to live with them that they began to call me the Visitor. They said I seemed not to be a part of things, as if I didn’t live in their house with them, as if they weren’t like a family to me, as if I were just passing through, just saying one long Hallo!, and soon would be saying a quick Goodbye! So long! It was very nice!

Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy*—

Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants; electric light the most efficient policeman.

Louis Brandeis—

—Where are you from?

—I’m from Ottawa.

—Yes, but where are you really from?

The opportunity to accept a new job at a university in the United States was just the focus I needed to organize my thinking about the deceptively simple idea of feeling at home. James Baldwin, in writing about his experience as an African American in the 1960s, describes the word “home” as having a “despairing and diabolical ring.” I can’t remember the first time I encountered these words in his essay, *The Fire Next Time*, but I remember then and continue to experience now the feeling that he had this idea exactly right. Baldwin emphasizes the important felt difference between being a citizen of a country—or even being born in a country—and feeling at home in a country. The more I thought about the prospect of leaving Canada in order to live somewhere else, the more I suspected that I should feel more nostalgic or sentimental or at least wary about leaving than I did. And while I have had a lot of time to think about my relationship to the country in which I was born, and—until now—the only country I've ever lived in, these feelings of attachment or loss have yet to present themselves to me, and truth be told, I'm not expecting them to.

Instead of nostalgia, I have been moved to try to share what I’ve discovered, which first expressed itself in *You Must Be a Basketball Player: Rethinking Integration in the University*, where I discuss the lack of ethnocultural diversity in the faculties of Canada's universities. But I've come to realize that the whole thing is a lot more intensely personal than just the place where I've spent my professional life and the years I devoted to the training necessary to begin work in an academic job. After all, my decision to leave the place where I worked for 17 years and go somewhere else makes it clear that one can change where one does his job if he's unhappy there. (And let me be clear, I was unhappy where I was. To make this point very briefly, I will only say that the year in which I decided to move was a year during which I was scheduled for a full-year sabbatical. As any academic will tell you, the full-year sabbatical is pretty much as good as it gets, a year devoted entirely to one's own reading, writing, and research. Rather than stay where I was and take up my year of sabbatical, and as a result run the risk that in the next year there might not be a job in my area, or that I might not get one, meaning I would have to stay where I was even longer, I left a full-year sabbatical on the table, and just left.)

But leaving my place of work did not resolve the bigger issue, as I have come to realize. The bigger issue is whether or not the country I have innocently and uncritically called my home has made it a point not to ask of itself the hard questions about the composition of its population that its decision-makers and educators feel all-too confident in asking of other countries. After all, more diversity among food servers and taxi drivers—leaving the levels authority, expertise and influence almost entirely unchanged—could not possibly have been what Pierre Trudeau meant when he started talking about multiculturalism. Or maybe it was. Let’s call this another example of the law of unintended consequences. In either case, that is how multiculturalism now looks to many black Canadians, and, I would hazard to guess, many other Canadians of colour as well. All you need is to spend some time in a room of black scholars in Canada and bring up the word “multiculturalism” and listen for the ensuing derisive laughter to get a sense of what I'm talking about. The derision is similar to what you hear when a group of African American scholars are asked to discuss the term “post-racial” seriously.

The whole thing is all the more personal to me now because my partner and I just had a son, and this adorable little boy, who has been the object of much cooing and approving attention—sometimes by some of the same people who don't think twice about dehumanizing other people of his ethnocultural makeup—will eventually have to make sense of the same contradictions and hypocrisies that have resulted in my having never felt “Canadian” during the 49 years in which I lived in Canada. (This disjunction between approval of the infant and dehumanization of the adult has me wondering how old my little boy will have to be before he goes from the one to the other.) In fact, my son will have an even more complicated relationship to “home,” as a biracial American citizen with Canadian parents and Jamaican grandparents. I hope that what I work out here may eventually serve to help him work out what will inevitably be an equally if not more complicated idea of “home.” As I said, this has all become quite personal, although as I now realize, it always has been.

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I have come to believe that little built into its national culture suggests that Canada is willing to begin asking of itself the sorts of difficult questions that it will need to ask if it wants its claims of openmindedness and “multiculturalism” to sound like anything more than empty words as far as its black citizens are concerned. Coming to this realization is a crisis for me, since I grew up believing in those claims, and resisting the mounting body of evidence arguing against it, even as some of that evidence worked directly against my own interest and wellbeing.

As a black Canadian, the Canada that I have come to see is different from the idealized Canada of Tim Hortons commercials, Hockey Night in Canada, and the imaginings of some Canadians. It’s a Canada that takes credit for a level of openmindedness that far exceeds its reality. It’s a Canada that distinguishes itself for its population of citizens who passively lay claim to welcoming difference, while staying silent when those around them who are in fact different are disenfranchised, dehumanized, undervalued, and left to feel that we do not belong in the country in which many of us were born, or about which we told tales of tolerance.

Canada’s next great challenge is not economic, or even political. It’s ethical. Being nice from a distance to the Vietnamese family who happen to live on your street is not enough. Being polite to the Somali man who works in your office is not something to be proud of. It is the bare acceptable minimum required of any human being, and needs to be identified as such. At what point will people like me be enabled to feel like we belong in Canada? Or will we have to accept our experience as visitors to Canada, no matter how long we lived there?

I like the notion of “visitors” and “members” because of the discomfort I hope they will cause anyone who read this book. I am aware that my use of “visitors” and “members” will cause some to dismiss what might appear to be a descriptive blunt instrument. What about those white Canadians who have also been made to feel like visitors? What about those black Canadians and other people of colour living in Canada who feel completely welcomed, integrated, and valued? To the former group, I extend my sympathies, because I know all too well how this experience of disenfranchisement feels. In fact, it’s easy to feel even more sympathy for them, since they are otherwise being told that this is *their* country, and theirs alone. To feel marginalized under those circumstances must be especially galling. To the latter group, I say congratulations. I hope your good fortune in Canada continues.

I also know that there are people who would fall under the description of “member” who are actively engaging with these issues, and not just accepting the status quo, as well as “visitors” who would rather let the whole situation continue to go undiscussed in Canadian public life. And, if we really want to start grinding this more finely, none of us experience the world in exactly the same way all of the time. Of course, I recognize that all of our experiences take place on a continuum and there is rarely anything so—if I may say—black and white as to suggest that all are either always one or the other. But I will say two things here, by way of beginning: 1) I have always felt like a visitor to Canada, even on my best days. I am only a little surprised (and, frankly, embarrassed) by how long it has taken me to seize upon a term that so accurately describes my experience; 2) by focusing our attention on these two quite stark and yet representative experiences, I hope to open up a constructive conversation about the structural, cultural, and political reasons why I might be inclined to characterize my experience in Canada and the experience of many others in such terms. That is a conversation Canadians have avoided having in public, and need to begin having, if Canada is going to live up to its claims of diversity and tolerance, even as it acknowledges its relative lack of diversity, a lack most notable the higher up into decision-making Canada one ventures.

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In some ways, this book picks up where *You Must Be a Basketball Player: Rethinking Integration in the University* leaves off, although I have to admit that I am surprised to find myself saying this. I honestly thought that book had said everything I wanted to contribute to discussions of race and the problems of racism in Canada, focussing as it does on the area of Canadian society that I know best, the world of the university. Since the university is so influential in producing future decision-makers and shaping how and what they think about, I thought that by making what I consider the obvious point that Canadian society already features hiring practices that are preferential in some measure (through policies and practices of gender parity, regional representation, and spousal hiring, among others), I was genuinely hopeful that much that is necessary to change Canada in ways that include more of its citizens was already in place.

But nothing at rest will move without some force being exerted upon it. Even the boulder that looks at rest and then eventually tumbles down the side of a mountain has had the force of gravity pulling against it for longer than anyone knows, but the force was there, working against the boulder until finally the boulder yielded. And while this is really all the physics I know, it is all the physics anyone needs to know when it comes to political change. This is how I came to realize that I had more to say on these issues, now from a broader and, at the same time, more personal perspective. In addition to the relatively narrow world of the academy, there are more broadly applicable perspectives and experiences that I have had and observed as a Canadian who has spent his entire life implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) being told he does not “look” Canadian, by which I mean, who is not white. These observations might mean something to other Canadians who have also found themselves enduring similar experiences. In other words, these people have experienced life in Canada as visitors, as I have. These broader considerations are the subject of this book.

While I’m admitting things, I should also acknowledge that I approach this book from a slightly different perspective than the earlier one. In much that I’ve written and said on these subjects earlier, I came at the issues from what I recognize to be a typically liberal position. I have believed that change could be brought about by individuals in individual conversations and through what I am now sort of embarrassed to identify as “good will.” I believed that present individual good will could correct past wrongs.

I have seen enough good will to have been able to believe this for a long time. But while seeing this good will, I’ve also seen very little change, in real terms, in how Canada looks, as a nation and—more importantly—sounds as a culture. Even as Canada’s population changes in general, its composition at the decision-making levels and its commitment to engage publicly with the issues that are necessarily brought about by changes in the Canadian population remain rudimentary at best. What’s more, many Canadians continue to believe that Canada does not have any problems with respect to issues of race, that these are the problems of other countries. The persistence of these beliefs has eroded my own good will, and my liberalist view of individuals holding the potential for change has been put under real stress over time.

I trace my now somewhat abashed liberalism back to when I was first hired as an academic out of graduate school. I remember quite clearly telling a friend of mine how much I looked forward to being a role model for the black students that I would be teaching. It seemed important that these students in particular see someone who would trace his history back to where they traced theirs doing the job I would be doing. My oversight here was not realizing how few black students I would actually teach in my undergraduate classes or graduate seminars. I somehow assumed that these students would just magically appear in my classes. After a couple of years of teaching, I amended my idealistic goal to thinking that I could serve as a role model for my white students, so that they might rethink and confront their own assumptions and associations about what people who didn’t look like them might be capable of. Here, too, I overlooked something very important and yet very basic. I had not taken into account the environment in which I would be encountering these students. My interaction with them can only be taken in the context of the other classes they take, the other assumptions left unexamined, the other lessons they learn both explicitly and implicitly that create and reinforce the Canada they live in and will work in as professionals. This is the confrontation that many well-meaning parents encounter after they have made their lofty declarations about how much television their children will watch, or how many hours they will spend online. These good intentions eventually clash with the reality of how much television is being watched by the friends of the well-meaning parents, and how long *those* kids spend online. From there, inevitably, compromises get made. In other words, my idealism was the product of my liberalism, that belief that the individual moves the world, and not the structures in which these individuals live and work. This oversight and its myriad costs are what I hope to illuminate here, by talking about how all of this has affected one very (some would say, over-) educated black Canadian man.

A growing number of scholars in Canada work on issues of race and racism, from positions of social justice and anti-racism, and a growing number of them are also “racialized,” a useful term often employed by these scholars to signal how race is a process imposed upon some by others. Everyone has some racial identity, after all, it’s just that some do not ever have to think about this fact, while others of us do all of the time. This group of thinkers, activists, and intellectuals has my highest respect, and I am proud to call some of them my friends. They persist in trying to invoke change within professional environments that are set up, in many ways, to alienate these same people, to resist change, and to undermine anyone who attempts to bring about change. Most of these scholars, I have to admit, argue from a much more progressive political perspective than my liberalism, another reason why I respect them as I do, since these progressive stances have often cost them greatly, personally, professionally, emotionally, and socially.

What I want to do here, though, is to contribute to a discussion that I would like to take place in the public mind as much as possible, because only then can the sunlight of the Brandeis quotation I use above do its work. What follows is less an argument for the policy implications of affirmative action or “diversity,” as more and more institutions like to say, and instead a personal account of the experience that comes from feeling that your concerns are not taken seriously by the country in which you have lived all of your life.

What is left of my liberalism is given voice in this book. I, perhaps stubbornly, perhaps stupidly, insist that the move to a more engaged Canada on issues of race and racism is analogous to the stages by which one learns a new language. First, we learn basic vocabulary and grammar rules. Then, we start to put thoughts together, although at first we think in our native language and then haltingly translate our thoughts into the new language. The third stage—fluency—is only reached when we can think in that new language, almost as though it were our first, without that intervening step of translation. That is the stage when we acquire idiom, are able to tell jokes, and engage in wordplay. Right now, on these important issues, Canada is at the stage of basic vocabulary and grammar rules, at best. There are occasional representations or pronouncements of the importance of diversity, by corporations, universities, and politicians, in newspapers, magazines, and on websites. But Canada will not progress towards fluency if, as a nation, there is no will to learn. A second stage would comprise not only a recognition but an implementation of a change to the levels of decision-makers who influence the way Canada looks to itself and to the rest of the world. How Canada looks cannot help but affect how Canadians who do not trace our lineage to Western Europe feel about and experience living in Canada. The third stage (a long way off, to be sure) would consist of an open conversation, in which many of the unstated barriers that obscure how Canada is experienced by those who do not conventionally “look” Canadian are exposed, discussed, argued over by members of the many different subgroups who make up twenty-first-century Canada.

But this progress cannot happen on its own, as is the case with any progress. It can only happen as a result of a conscious will within the Canadian population, principally among those I refer to as members—those Canadians who trace their lineage back to Western Europe, principally, and have always been able to take for granted that they “look” Canadian. White Canadians, in other words. It is this lack of will towards progress among Canada’s members, and the related lack of willingness to recognize the seriousness of the problems and of the costs of this lack of will, that frustrates my liberalism and the good will of those of us who would like to be able to identify ourselves as Canadians, if only the nation would acknowledge and include us, instead of merely tolerating us.

Canadians are stereotypically characterized as “polite” and “nice.” This is a stereotype trafficked in by Canadians as well as by non-Canadians, when they turn their minds to Canada, which does not tend to be very often. But these characterizations have encouraged a complacency that comes with real costs. Put another way, I have met any number of people who were polite and nice who were not Canadian. Are these Americans, Swiss, Germans, English, not to mention Cameroonians, Ghanaians, Indians, and—goodness knows—Jamaicans just exceptions that prove some other more general rule about what people from these countries are *really* like? Put still another way, are these characterizations of Canadians acceptable because they may be read as positive? One rarely finds citizens of any nation reveling in the negative stereotypes that inevitably persist about most nationalities, after all.

All of this relates directly to the costs of the lack of will toward progress, and the metaphor of the visitor. Without serious engagement with the issues of race and racism that persist in Canada, we who have wanted to live as Canadians will continue to be made to feel like visitors, a dynamic made all the easier because we are continually being told how polite and nice everyone is being towards us, even in the face of all evidence to the contrary. When I use the term “visitor,” I mean it specifically as different from “guest.” Guests are invited, whereas visitors may arrive for any number of reasons. We welcome our guests, because we invited them. We sometimes welcome visitors, as cities try to with tourists. But we also sometimes can only tolerate them, as we wait for them to leave. (Just think about all the complaining about tourists done by the residents of cities that are well-known tourist destinations.) It is true that guests can also overstay their welcomes, but visitors have a temporariness imprinted upon them from the beginning. It is usually understand that visitors are not staying. The circumstances that make a growing percentage of the population feel like visitors will not improve on their own, try as many might to continue believing that. More problematic still are those who continue to believe that there is nothing that needs improvement. Worse still, perhaps, are those who feel that talking about these issues (“bringing up race,” as it’s sometimes put) will only make things worse. The consequences of doing nothing may become increasingly unpleasant if nothing continues to be done.

The visitor metaphor is useful because of the combination of familiarity and stress that it almost inevitably conjures. For instance, several years ago, I went to stay with my sister and her family over the Christmas holiday. My life had taken a couple of unforeseen turns, and at moments like that, one feels the need to be around family. It was great, although a little tense at first. I had to get reacquainted with my sister, her husband, and their two children, Ella and Eli, whom I was only just getting to know. That holiday led to several visits throughout the year and then another Christmas visit. The second one was easier, as would be expected. Everyone was more comfortable and more used to each other. In other words, I was no longer a visitor.

In a way, being a visitor is special. You are treated differently from everyone else, and you can be the centre of attention, if you like that kind of thing. But while it’s a great place to visit, you would not want to live there. You cannot make the sorts of claims or demands that your hosts can. So it becomes important, especially in a society that prides itself on being diverse and tolerant, a society whose composition is changing (if slowly), to move beyond this silent game of members and visitors, so that Canadians as a group can start actively engaging with one another from a perspective of justice, citizenship, and genuine equality. But this is only the job of individuals to the extent that they can change and improve the structures in which they live and work.

We need only look at what Statistics Canada has to say about the 2011 census:

In 2011, nearly 6,264,800 people identified themselves as a member of the visible minority population. They represented 19.1% of Canada's total population, compared with 16.2% in the 2006 Census.

This increase in proportion was largely because of the increasing number of immigrants from non-European countries. Visible minorities accounted for 78.0% of the immigrants who arrived between 2006 and 2011. In contrast, they made up 12.4% of immigrants who arrived before 1971.

Combined, the three largest visible minority groups—South Asians, Chinese and Blacks—accounted for 61.3% of the visible minority population. They were followed by Filipinos, Latin Americans, Arabs, Southeast Asians, West Asians, Koreans and Japanese.

In 2011, 1,567,400 individuals identified themselves as South Asian, the largest visible minority group. They represented one-quarter (25.0%) of the total visible minority population.

The second largest group was Chinese, who numbered just over 1,324,700. They made up 21.1% of the visible minority population. Just under 945,700 individuals identified themselves as Blacks, the third largest group. They made up 15.1% of the visible minority population. (http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/130508/dq130508b-eng.htm)

All of this means that the Canadian government is aware of the substantial changes in the Canadian population, although has committed nothing more than official multiculturalism (whatever that means) to addressing the potential contributions, requirements, and demands of this growing segment of Canada’s population. As the son of two of those non-European immigrants who arrived in Canada in that small but intrepid group before 1971, I am intensely aware of this lack of engagement and acknowledgement, and have recently made a personal and professional decision that I believe may be seen as one of the symptoms of this lack of engagement.

You can’t help but notice, too, that this change to Canada’s population is a relatively recent phenomenon. This means that Canada may have a chance to improve how it deals with race and racism as another generation of potential decision-makers comes of age. What is most important, then, is to seize this opportunity explicitly and consciously, rather than continuing to hope things will improve on their own, or pretending there is nothing that needs improvement at all.

I said that I am one of the symptoms of the lack of engagement I’m describing. Many Canadians should only hope that if they continue not to acknowledge the realities of race in Canada that the people most affected will simply leave. But that will more than likely not be the case. Many will stay in the nominally tolerant cities of Canada, and express their feelings of displeasure and disenfranchisement in considerably more direct ways. Then there will be newspaper and magazine articles about “what is wrong” in the population of Group X or Group Y. But there is no mystery here. Just a lack of a willingness to take the issues facing Group X or Y seriously. That there will be fallout is predictable. What that fallout will remains to be seen if nothing changes.

I recently accepted a job at an American university. Even though I was born in Canada, and spent the first 49 years of my life living in Canada, I have always felt like a visitor in the country of my birth. Many of the cultural examples I use in this book come from American sources. I was asked about this tendency in my work several years ago during the question-and-answer session after a talk I’d been invited to give. The reason for this is quite simple, but it makes a significant point that is symptomatic of my experience in attempting to be a Canadian. Born in Canada as I was in 1964 meant never seeing myself represented or actively participating in Canadian culture. In a lot of ways the same holds true today, especially when I look at the levels of government, media, and the other levels of decision-making that make up day-to-day life in Canada. As a result, from a very young age I began to look to the United States for people who looked like me doing things that mattered in their country’s life. They also mattered within their country. Many of my heroes were dignified African American athletes—Julius Erving, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Arthur Ashe, Muhammad Ali, Tommie Smith, John Carlos, to name a few—men whose achievements on the sports fields were equaled and often surpassed by their dignity, grace under pressure, and determination in the face of many obstacles off the field. As I grew up, I began reading about Jackie Robinson and Jack Johnson, whose disparate examples contributed further to my sense of what was possible.

In *Days of Grace*, his autobiography,Ashe tells the story of his announcement of his HIV diagnosis in 1992. When asked if this was the biggest challenge he’d ever had to face, Ashe answered no. He said the biggest challenge he’d ever had to face was being black in America. Canada’s sports world does not provide moments like this. In fact, since Canada’s sports world is a product of the country itself, it replicates the blind spots of the country as a whole and rarely approaches such questions. But the American sports world has, and many times, the authors of these moments have been black. Once I started looking in that direction, I was encouraged to continue looking there, and discouraged from looking in Canada. And so I have found much that I’ve needed in looking southwards, including, now, what may be my home.

There is another related reason why American examples have been so helpful to me in thinking about the experience of being a visitor in Canada, though, and this additional reason is worth keeping in mind. Many Canadians have taken a great deal of consolation from a belief that Canada is “not as bad” as the United States on the subject of race. Those inclined to acknowledge race issues in Canada at all have usually been willing to go only as far as to say that Canadian racism is more “subtle” than the brand practiced in the United States. The way that American examples help to illuminate Canadian racism, though, should make clear that there are real similarities between the racism in Canada and that in the United States, similarities that Canadians should start to think seriously about. The suggestion about the subtlety of Canadian racism and the overtness of its American counterpart also overlooks the variations within both expressions of bigotry. After all, “Americans” are no more a monolith than “Canadians” are. After being called a name on a Canadian street, it has never occurred to me to think, “Wow, imagine how much worse I would feel right now if this had happened in the States.” The similarities between American and Canadian expressions of racism, then, are worth keeping in mind. In fact, the last time I was called a name on a street (in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, while out walking my Great Dane) has me thinking more about the difference between the Canada I live in and that imagined by those who derive solace from the mental picture of Canada as a gentler nation, free of the problems of the United States. Put another way, the fact that American examples help illuminate Canadian racism makes clear just how different my experience of living in Canada has been from many of the people I know, grew up with, worked with, and have become friends with. Many of them have given voice to this “subtlety” theory of Canadian racism. It’s probably time to consider what this bargain that they have asked of me and of Canadian visitors—a bargain they need not enter into themselves—actually means for Canada’s claims about itself.

In the brief time I’ve lived in the United States, I’ve noticed that when I talk about Canada I sound a lot like my African American friends do when they talk about America. Perhaps this is as it ever was, where we can inevitably be most critical of the place we know best. But this similarity also points up that it has come time for all Canadians to engage publicly and explicitly with the problems that bedevil the rest of the nations of the world, instead of being content with subtlety.