

Assimilating (Too Much)

In a recent episode of this *American Life*, writer Saa-chi Kohl speaks to her parents about the fact that she is as an adult living in New York City, paying to take Hindi classes.¹⁰³ She asks her parents why they did not make an effort to teach her her mother tongue, and if they are proud that she is trying to learn now. They say that their hopes for moving to a new country were for their children to become part of this new culture, and that learning English and French were the priority. They had hoped that learning Hindi would come naturally to them, but when it did not, they did not want to force it. Kohl asks her mother if she thinks her and her brother assimilated “too much,” to which her mother responds “maybe.”¹⁰⁴

I relate very much to Kohl’s experience of not being able to speak fluently in her mother tongue. When my

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103 Scaachi Koul, “This American Life,” *This American Life* (blog) (WBEZ Chicago, December 27, 2019), <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/690/too-close-to-home>

104 Ibid.

parents immigrated here, they became fiercely determined to adopt “Canadian” values and looked down on other new immigrants who did not. I point to this excerpt of Kohl’s because I am preoccupied with this idea of assimilating “too much.” While assimilating for migrants is a survival tactic that is seen as necessary, it is also self-imposed. Not imposed on us forcibly by the state, but encouraged through society. We have had the option, but to choose not to assimilate would be to make our lives very difficult.

When my parents came to Canada, it was on the wave of the multiculturalism movement. In 1971 Pierre Trudeau announced that Canada would be the first country in the world to take on the official policy of multiculturalism.¹⁰⁵ This was meant to preserve the rights and freedoms of ethnic groups from diverse cultural backgrounds. The government was meant to support multiculturalism by providing support to cultural groups in their development and growth, helping to overcome barriers in participating in Canadian society, promoting exchanges between cultural groups, and helping ethnic minorities learn English and French.¹⁰⁶

We know that throughout the twentieth century, the Canadian government also had a policy of cultural genocide that implemented the opposite for Indigenous peoples. The Indian Act, residential schooling, the 60’s scoop, and other painful policies resulted in Indigenous peoples being forcibly removed from their homes, unable to speak their language and practice

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105 Jan Raska, "Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21," *Canadian Multiculturalism Policy*, 1971 | Pier 21, 2017, accessed April 04, 2018, <https://pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/canadian-multiculturalism-policy-1971>.

106 Ibid.

their traditions.¹⁰⁷ These same policies of preservation were not extended to the first people of Turtle Island. It was strange for me to realize later in my adulthood, that these two kinds of policies from the Canadian government were implemented at the same moment in time.

When I think of the way multiculturalism in Canada was explained to me as a child, it was always with pride. I remember specifically in the first grade, one of our first assignments was to make presentations on the countries that we were “from.” I remember looking around in celebration as all the children reported on the countries their parents and grandparents came from, and spoke about their traditional food, clothing and languages. The narrative we were told, was that we all came from other countries and yet we had all come to this promised land called Canada in order to live in harmony. Yet the history of who was here before we came to this barren land, was nowhere on the table.

In the paper “Decolonizing Anti-racism,” Bonita Lawrence speaks about how her mother, who was Mi’kmaq and Acadian, was made to feel inferior and marginalized by Anglo and Francophone Canadians in Eastern Canada in the 1960s. At this time, her mother considered immigrants of colour as allies and friends. She says her mother “[s]aw our struggle for survival and adaption to the dominant culture in common.”¹⁰⁸ Lawrence then speaks about how in the years since then pressures of assimilation and urbanization has resulted in many Indigenous people losing vital parts of their

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107 J.R. Miller, "Residential Schools," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, October 10, 2012, , accessed April 04, 2018, <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/residential-schools/>.

108 Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua, “Decolonizing Anti-Racism,” in *Cultivating Canada : Reconciliation through the Lens of Cultural Diversity* (Aboriginal Healing Foundation; Canadian First edition, 2011), pp. 235-261)

identity and culture, while at the same time the country mandated its multiculturalism policy, inviting large scale immigration. Indigenous theorists have largely been silent on issues such as multiculturalism, which affords rights and cultural preservation to new groups while rendering their struggles invisible.¹⁰⁹

Indeed, when non-Aboriginal people of colour are invoked in public discourse, it is often within the multicultural frame, which ignores the historic diversity of Canada and the profound power imbalances that shaped it. Multiculturalism is a liberal social contract of tolerance for cultural difference between a nation. But tolerance is not anti-racism and it will not end racism.¹¹⁰

This text goes on to critique the way postcolonial scholars have excluded Indigenous peoples in their writing and scholarship, and in a way condoning the genocide or vision of Aboriginal people as a myth of the past. She says:

These practices of exclusion and segregation reflect the contradictory ways in which people of colour are situated within the nation-state. On the one hand, they are marginalized by a white settler nationalist projects, and yet on the other hand, as citizens, they are invited to take part in ongoing colonialism. Because of this, people of colour have a complex relationship to Indigeneity.¹¹¹

109 Ibid, 253

110 Ibid, 266

111 Ibid, 254

Often new immigrants are ignorant to the history of exploitation of Indigenous people, as this is not a history that is readily accessible at tourist sites, or on their mandatory citizenship test. By the time they learn about the history, feelings can be mixed. Sherene Razack explains how the experiences of migrant people of colour intersect and change when they come to a new land. She explains “Think of the migrant woman of colour, who, once in Canada becomes ‘temporary foreign worker,’ ‘underemployed,’ ‘minority,’ ‘marginal’ and ‘settler’ all at once.” This alters her sense of self in ways that both empower and exploit.¹¹²

Richard Fung in *13 Conversations About Art and Cultural Race Politics*, written in 2002 says,

I sense a move to position Aboriginal people as just another ethnic minority within the multicultural patchwork (a pesky, unreasonably demanding one at that)... I fear that immigrant people who are not aware of the historical context, and are fed a narrow diet of Aboriginal stereotypes in the media, can become a tool in delegitimizing Aboriginal rights. So culture and curriculum are important sites, not just for Aboriginal people’s sense of self, but for the potential to provide a more complex and accurate understanding for non-Aboriginal people as well.¹¹³

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112 Robinder Kaur Sehdev, “People of Colour in Treaty,” in *Cultivating Canada : Reconciliation through the Lens of Cultural Diversity* (Aboriginal Healing Foundation; Canadian First edition, 2011), pp. 265-273)

113 Monika Kin Gagnon and Richard Fung, *13 Conversations about Art and Cultural Race Politics* (Montréal: Artextes editions, 2002), pp. 86)

Once we do learn about this problematic history and erasure, what is to be done? Can we as settler migrants of colour still make work about our experiences of disenfranchisement, while also talking about the history of genocide of Indigenous people on this continent?

Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang write about common strategies that settlers use in order to “move to innocence” in their seminal essay “Decolonization is not a Metaphor”. When it comes to other colonized settler migrants, things become a little more complicated, in a tactic Tuck and Wang call “colonial equivocation.”¹¹⁴ They say that the problem with labeling all struggles against imperialism as decolonizing work, is that it makes ambiguous the difference between decolonizing and social justice work especially among queer groups, people of colour, and others who are marginalized by the settler nation-state.¹¹⁵ The authors point to the fact that certain migrant groups are seen as more model minorities or known to assimilate more easily into the dominant culture. For these minority groups becoming a white settler is an impossible feat that breaks the myth of the democratic nation-state.

Tuck and Wang’s main criticism is that anti-colonial critique is not the same as decolonizing framework. Anti-colonial critique only empowers post-colonial subjects by trying to remake and subvert colonial tactics. In this way they are perpetuating settler colonial history and reclaiming Native land. “Seeking stolen resources is entangled with settler colonialism because those resources were nature/Native first, then enlisted into the service of settlement and thus almost impossible

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114 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” in *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1st ed., vol. 1 (2012). 16.

115 Ibid, 17

to reclaim without re-occupying Native land.”¹¹⁶ The act of avoiding the conversation of settler colonialism in relation to new migrant groups, and lack of commitment to Indigenous sovereignty, is a tactic that post-colonial marginalized groups use to absolve themselves of settler guilt. “The reality is that ongoing settlement of Indigenous lands, whether by white people or people of colour, is still part of Canada’s nation-building project, and is still premised on the displacement of Indigenous peoples.”¹¹⁷

Robinder Kaur Sehdev asks people of colour to rethink the meaning and purpose of treaties, and consider them a living document and a means to move forward. He says:

We belong here not because Canada opened its doors, but because Aboriginal nations permitted settler governance on their lands. Finally, we must identify as treaty citizens and so refuse the liberal strategies of tolerance and inclusion of difference at the expense of the more difficult task of formative change. After all, treaty is the space where power is negotiated.¹¹⁸

I look towards these photographs as markers of my parents journey and my future. I make this work in hopes of understanding where we have come from, but more importantly where we are now and how I am complicit in the cultural fabric of this place, so-called “Canada.” The story of migrants in this nation is not about us vs. them, here vs. there, east vs. west. It is not a binary, and to present it as such is to ignore the complex and

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116 Ibid, 17

117 Robinder Kaur Sehdev, “People of Colour in Treaty”, pp. 270

118 Ibid, 273

emotional history of this land, and us as people. In this project I attempt to touch on many of the factors and systems that have brought me to where I am, which is ultimately a place of extreme privilege, that I owe to my parents and the systems that brought us here. But those same systems have been violent to so many and continue to cause harm. It is important to remember these interactions as we move forward and understand how this mosaic or puzzle forms who we are and how we fit into or resist the cultural fabric of “Canada.”

We are at a point in which the intersectionality of our experiences must be addressed. I believe this is done by continuing to ask questions, poke holes, and provoke dialogue. It can be a slippery place to inhabit, and you might find yourself, like I do in this text, talking about many things all at once. This is a critique I have sometimes heard about my work, that I am trying to talk about too many things at the same time. But does this mean that these topics are not related? That these connections are not sound? Or simply that it is too much for the audience to grasp? I do not expect everyone who views my work to understand all of its layers, however it is also my responsibility as an artist to make clear that I am thinking about the correlation of all these states of being, as they are also who make me who I am, and the work what it is.

I would like to close with this quote by filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin, as she describes the path forward towards healing from past traumas. She speaks about finding healing very close to the spot in which you have pain. I believe this can also translate to looking closely at ourselves and the paths that have brought us to where we are. Only by looking closely at where we have been can we find the steps to bring us forward.

In closing, I don't want to give the impression that I'm against anyone. This was the way the country was taken-against Aboriginal people, against the culture, against the spiritual way of life. It was always against. Which is why we are where we are now. One day a man told me something that I will never forget, and the more I see how life is, the more I think it is truthful. He said, sometimes you're walking in the bush, and you touch a plant, and it gives you a sickness on your skin, or you could have pain. This happens all the time. But he told me that whatever gave you the pain, if you look hard enough you're going to find, very close to it, a plant that's going to cure you.¹¹⁹