# Book Review/Compte rendu

**Cecil Foster**, *Blackness and Modernity: The Colour of Humanity and the Quest for Freedom*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007, 656 pp. $32.95 paper (978-0-7735-3247-2), $85.00 hardcover (978-0-7735-3105-5)

Having finished this dense, frustrating — and ultimately exhilarating — book with its deep debt to Hegel, one's first impulse is to reread it, thus producing an ongoing deferral: the review that never would be. In the end all the notes, checkmarks, underlines and exclamation marks stand not as guide posts but as obstacles. It is beyond my ability to stitch together the countless "ah ha" moments, brilliant insights either from Foster himself or from those he appropriates to build his argument to write one review — though they might be recruited for several. Yet the book affected me profoundly despite the prohibitions posed by its sustained Hegelian scaffolding and the use of language from another era.

My interest was secured early in the book upon reading a comment heard once before, in 1972 from a friend, Rodney John, whose charge of racism against Perry Anderson precipitated the dramatic event known as the Sir George Williams Affair. "The move to call ourselves Black cannot be sustained," John told me, sadly. "It is too implicated in notions of evil and darkness." I was stunned, what could one make of this? Perhaps it was cowardice, perhaps intellectual laziness, but I let it fall from consciousness until reading Foster's questions: Is it possible, he asks, "to break the bind that historically associates black skin with evil, inferiority, exclusion, unenlightenment and cultural backwardness?" Not "*in the prevailing consciousness*," (my emphasis) he continues, and as a result, "the recognition of a group of citizens based solely on their somatic features can only lead Canada into an Hegelian unhappy consciousness — one in which, even with the best intentions on all sides, the ideals and goals of multiculturalism always appear beyond the society's grasp" (p. 14). Foster aims to explain why this is so, and also to reveal from within the prevailing order the possible grounds for change. "There is a crack," chants Leonard Cohen, "a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."

*Blackness and Modernity* provides a neo-Hegelian exploration of Blackness, back to the Greeks and Romans, sideways to Africa, lingering

on the Bible, Old and New Testaments, through the (false) promises of the Enlightenment and Modernity more generally, to tease out the intentions of multiculturalism in Canada and the consequences and despair produced by its limitations. His method is to "start with the categories and then try to find their genesis," thus opening the space to "reconfigure Blackness and Whiteness in a non-somatic way." By retrieving the philosophical and religious thinking that predates the connection between skin colour and character he plots a long and permanent detour around the racist thinking of some several hundred years to arrive at the possibility of a *genuine* multiculturalism. This is an ambitious undertaking.

Foster's broad religious and philosophical canvas widens the lens from the Blackness = evil connection to expose the contradictory meanings of Blackness (and Whiteness). If Whiteness is Blackness's opposite, thereby purity and goodness, that makes it unchangeable; humans (if they are fortunate) ascend to heaven and just groove for eternity. Creativity, culture, relationships all take root not in unchangeable Whiteness but from changeable Blackness. If Eve had not tempted Adam with the fruit of knowledge including sex, there would be no history, only an infinite stay in the Garden of Eden. The Greek gods were certainly not White (i.e., good and pure); they were often miserable to each other and certainly to human beings who could only aspire to become gods with the privilege of using those left behind as their playthings. Foster argues that Greek philosophical thought did not equate skin colour — the somatic — with Whiteness and Blackness (p. 276). Nor did the Hebrews or the Africans.

The twinning of somatic Blackness and inferiority was the accomplishment of Western Modernity with stories that rationalized the slave trade on the basis of skin colour alone (p. 303). And today Statistics Canada in its taxonomical wisdom lists Black as one of the "ethnic categories" in the Census. As Foster and others have pointed out, unlike Ukrainian or Filipino, there is no referent for Black — except skin colour. Hence Foster's comment above "that the recognition of a group of citizens based solely on their somatic features can only lead Canada into an Hegelian unhappy consciousness."

If it were that easy to change the categories, we'd be drifting to Nirvana (and the dream of unchangeable Whiteness). That was the hope, Foster submits, of the Hegelian Pierre Elliot Trudeau, who offered multiculturalism and a Charter of Rights and Freedoms. However, his liberalism did not permit him to see that abstract rights would not translate *mutatis mutandis* into economic, political, or social equality. "Liberal recognition is better than no recognition but it is not entirely satisfying," Foster observes. "Worse, it may be expressed objectively as tolerance,"

and the tolerated "may appear … ungrateful" for what the tolerant find magnanimous (pp. 178–9).

Here is the nub: "there was never any collective atonement and righting of past wrongs to eliminate the legacy of exclusions or inferiority for marginalized groups now brought conceptually into the mainstream" (p. 380). Decades after the inauguration of formal multiculturalism and the Charter of Rights, Statistics Canada continues to post a sociological reality revealing that current social practices make determinations based on skin colour alone. The legacy of Canada as a white settler society remains: the routine questions asked of those newly arrived in this country as well as those whose families came as United Empire loyalists is — you know this already: "where do you come from?" (My daughter now replies: "I come from the bee-u-tiful island of Montreal.") Lest you think the question benign, hear Foster out: "many in mainstream Canada see immigrants, especially those who are somatically Black as harbingers of death" (p. 320) — death of all the dominant white elites hold dear. Blacks are Outsiders; they cannot be (unambiguously) somatically Black and Canadian. Foster draws on a range of sociological data to show that the immigrant trajectory from the bottom to the middle or the top fails in the case of the somatically Black. Foster aims to explain "why a contingent group of people from many different backgrounds, cultures, ethnicities, nationality, all deemed to be changeable attributes … come to be identified as Black in a multicultural or cosmopolitan setting" (p. 29).

Given that Foster scarcely mentions gender in his first 19 chapters, the last chapter, subtitled "The Somatically Black Female: Hope and Divinity," appears out of the blue. Foster finds hope in his sociological investigation of the Black woman in Canada who "over the years [has] transformed herself into a higher income earner in Canada, attaining a position that is higher than her male counterpart and White females" (p. 482). Foster draws on studies which attribute this success to a complex set of patriarchal political factors: on the distaff side, Canada's decision to seek female domestic workers from the Caribbean beginning in the late 1960s; the opportunity this gave women to shed the economic dependence on and subordination to men that characterized life in the West Indies; and their gendered socialization that provided the knowledge and willingness to shoulder any burden in caring for their families. The situation of Black men in Canada, on the other hand, has been created through a related set of circumstances: men had been responsible in their home countries for economic support for their families; in the family, because of gender inequality men had only learned to be "pampered and catered to" (p. 497); Canadian society did not open jobs to Black men who tended to follow women here; as a result men had no role in Canadian soci-

ety, either in the economy or in the family, so they tended to become activists and intellectuals or skeptics (dropouts) (p. 499). For these reasons Black women have led the way in forging the conditions for a genuine multiculturalism, and men need ways to follow them. Decent jobs and opportunities must be opened up, and men must learn to share family responsibilities and to push for meaningful roles in the economy.

Feminists have documented the burdens carried by Black women in Canada and charted the deep patriarchal and racist relations that challenge them at every step. Foster has turned the tables in a sense by highlighting the unintended (happy) consequences of their oppression. And while many in the Black community, men and women, have viewed women's "power" as a problem for Black men, Foster insists that the work and success of Black women may break the connection between blackness and marginality and exclusion, and lead Canada out of its "unhappy" consciousness towards a genuine multiculturalism.

*Blackness and Modernity* won the Canadian Sociological Association's 2008 John Porter Tradition of Excellence Book Award. This book departs substantially from the kind of books previously honoured, though it does draw on Porter's work and his famous metaphor. But like *The Vertical Mosaic*, *Blackness and Modernity* is a *magnum opus*, wide ranging, almost scandalously ambitious, the work of a person with a generous heart and a brilliant mind, willing to toil in Clio's Vineyard for many years. This book should reinvigorate the political quest for a genuine multiculturalism.

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