

The Sound of Doors Slamming

Does Immigration Policy Fight Racism in the Workplace?

JOYCE WAYNE

Quand le Collège Sullivan de Toronto, a mis sur pied le programme « Le journalisme canadien des écrivains formés à l'étranger, « Canadian Journalism for Internationally Trained Writers », l'auteure et professeure Joyce Wayne a cru qu'une politique d'immigration de haut niveau s'imbriquerait avec les procédures académiques du Collège et avec celles qui concernent l'embauche des journalistes et des radiodiffuseurs. Cet article raconte les énormes difficultés que les étudiantEs immigrantEs rencontrent dans leur tentative de se réinsérer dans leur carrière au Canada.

Six years ago, on March 18, 2004, a conference was held in Ottawa called "Building a Writers in Exile Network." Sponsored by PEN Canada and hosted by the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Writers in Exile meeting gathered academics, writers, publishers and government officials to discuss the plight of immigrant and refugee writers in Canada. John Ralston Saul eloquently delivered the keynote address, "The Value of the Writer in Exile to Democratic Society and our Moral Obligation to Them." Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham graciously welcomed participants to the conference. Both men talked passionately about the role Canada could play in supporting the new émigré writer in Canada, who otherwise would be destined to obscurity and poverty. Publisher Louise Denys presented a paper beseeching the Canada Council to support foreign writers living in Canada; Haroon Siddiqui, editor emeritus at the *Toronto Star* and then President of PEN Canada, spoke about supporting "our brothers and sisters alone in this strange land." The stars of Canadian writing and publishing were out in full force. Toronto, they advised, had become the exilic writers capital of the world and we urgently needed to get our new colleagues out of survival jobs and back into writing and publishing, where they belonged.

Looking back, I must say I was utterly moved by the stories of our émigré writers, many of whom had been imprisoned in Iran, Iraq, Eritrea, and a plethora of other

dictatorships, before fleeing to safe houses provided by the Canadian government or by managing to enter Canada alone as refugee claimants. My own family had fled a vicious, war-torn land in the first half of the twentieth century and it has taken an entire generation before the children of my ancestors re-entered professional life in Canada. Naturally, I connected on a visceral level with the writers who were struggling to live intellectual lives rather than drown in mindless, routine jobs.

At that conference, in March 2004, I decided to develop a college program for immigrant writers living in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) who needed a Canadian credential, journalistic upgrading and a work placement at a Canadian newspaper or broadcaster to establish themselves in Canada at levels commensurate with their education and experience. The immigrant writers and journalists who gathered at this conference were splendidly educated, many with Master's degrees and Doctorates. Everyone at the conference wanted to help. At the closing event held at Rideau Hall, hosted by Governor General Adrienne Clarkson, the crowd was exuberant: this was Canada, the land of multiculturalism. Surely such bright, committed people as we could rescue our not-as-fortunate colleagues from poverty and professional obscurity. In the land that Pierre Trudeau had created, everything seemed possible that snowy night in Ottawa.

Six years later, I can say that I did successfully launch this program called Canadian Journalism for Internationally Trained Writers at Sheridan College in Oakville. A one-year Ontario college graduate program would serve immigrant writers well, I surmised. I also took it for granted that college protocols would be easier for immigrants to permeate than the university system, and the generally inviting environment would facilitate a seamless transition from newcomer to college student and eventually to employed person. Winter 2009 was the beginning of the third year of the program and after the current cohort graduates, about 75 students will have studied, and participated in work

placements at the CBC, *The Toronto Star*, *The Hamilton Spectator*, and other brave media organizations that agreed to help immigrant writers in Canada. On the surface, the program is an enormous success: multiculturalism official and unofficial in full bloom only 20 years after the *Canadian Multicultural Act* was passed! Even the idea of 30 students from about 15 different countries sitting side by side in a classroom discussing Dionne Brand is a multicultural dream. I witnessed that dream every Tuesday night for three hours when I taught the class Canadian literature.

Most nights we were all too impatient to even wait until 7:00 p.m., when the class commenced. Usually I arrived 15 minutes early, as did about a dozen students. There was so much to say, to explore, and to discover. Students talked about their home country experiences in light of the literature of immigration in Canada; they spoke about how the politics of multiculturalism affected their lives on a daily basis; they talked openly about racism; and I could sense that they were testing me constantly to see if I really believed in them, in the goals of this program. It took some time, but once the women in the class began to speak out they countered each sexist remark with angry, but sophisticated arguments. Racism was on the table, but so was sexism—and in a class where many participants had never experienced co-educational learning. However, for those who had been in Canada for more than a few years, they were waiting for the other shoe to drop, to see if this program, similar to other well-meaning attempts to find them decent jobs, would fail.

After class on Tuesday nights, I couldn't sleep. Discussions in the class were so powerful that other lecturers and their students came to observe. When one Afghani journalist suggested to the class that the enduring question of immigration and multiculturalism is "Who am I?" and everyone began to compare their own personal and literary relationship to the dual nature of the discourse of multiculturalism Canada, I knew I was living in a special world with the most interesting people I had ever had the pleasure to teach.

Yet, as the semester grew to a close, it became increasingly clear that many media organizations in the GTA were not at all interested in taking on our students for "free" work placements. I began to get anxious, and you can believe that the students did as well. Even if their English was excellent and their experience in Pakistan or Nigeria or Columbia impressive, some media organizations were more than hesitant to give them a break by training them in their own shop—in their own backyard—for a period of twelve weeks. Even those organizations that had donated funds to pay for scholarships for these students, sometimes suddenly reneged on the work placement piece and often at the last moment.

For instance, I attended a meeting with a press service on an August morning in 2007, when it was agreed that this organization would interview about four candidates from my class. Two positions would open for them at a pay rate

negotiated by the company and the union. I emailed the resumes of the strongest students in the class, all of who had worked previously in the English language in their home country or here. The night before the interviews I received a call from this service canceling the interviews. "But you haven't even met the candidates. How do you know before meeting them that their English is lousy and they won't be able to keep up in your newsroom?" I asked. The voice at the end of the line reminded me that an Ontario provincial election had been called and that the wire service would be too busy to help the students. "But this would be the best time to have them; they would learn so much," I said. No, the decision was irrevocable. The students were never interviewed and they were devastated by this turn of events.

Inside my own college, the situation became increasingly tense as well. At first everyone at the college seemed to support the students, but as the program grew and the money began to flow in from both the provincial government and the federal government to sustain it, systemic barriers were encountered. Some said my students were getting special treatment while the average Canadian student was *stuck playing by the rules*. More English testing was required to assess if the students could actually manage at a newspaper or broadcaster. Higher standards of English testing scores were imposed as cross-college admission policies continued to hamper access for immigrant students. No matter how difficult it was to obtain transcripts from overseas (which proves impossible from certain global hot spots: just try to get official university transcripts from Iran or Eritrea if you have been ordered to leave the country), the Registrar's office (and the Ontario College Admission System) intended to adhere to the rules.

The more successful the Sheridan Centre for Internationally Trained Individuals became, and the more grant money it attracted from Citizenship and Immigration Canada, the louder the voices became to ensure that the program was *playing by the rules*. Stiffer entrance requirements were needed, many argued. Those Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) requirements set in place by Citizenship and Immigration Canada, our major funder, were too low and possibly not of the same standard as the college's usual English requirement, argued some who decided it was prudent to test students twice, once by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) assessment entrance exams and again by Sheridan College's own assessment centres. Barrier upon barrier was added to the admission process. I worried over who would be left after all these testing procedures. Clearly, foreign-trained students presented new challenges to prevailing views and attitudes as it became evident that institutional admission policies, many in place since the Ontario college system was launched forty years ago, hadn't kept pace with inventive federal and provincial policies regarding immigrants.

As a government funded bridging program, I was all for letting pretty well anyone in who came to us with a valid

communications degree and experience in journalism. If they could attend classes four nights a week, from 7:00-10:00pm and again all day on Saturday to obtain a college certificate in Canadian journalism, I thought self selection would work. Many of the women in the program were working at survival jobs, raising children and attending classes. Every single one of the women passed the program with flying colours and most are working in the media or in government communications job today. In fact, the women graduates from the program as a group have secured the best jobs after graduation, including one at

Journalism for Internationally Trained Writers program to the tune of \$380,000. We applied for that exact amount in July 2006, receiving notice in November of that year that we were successful under the *Workplace bridging program, category 2: Getting a Job; Pathways to Employment for Internationally Trained Individuals*. Then the federal government added another \$180,000. In May of 2007, we applied once again to Citizenship and Immigration Canada to replicate the idea of the journalism program in the areas of accounting and early childhood education and a generic English language- training program. This

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BBC World in London and a few at Ontario Government Communication Divisions.

At senior levels of management at my college there was unequivocal support for this diversity program and for the students. It was at lower levels of management in the college bureaucracy that the situation became seriously problematic. To me, the emphasis on student success (i.e., more entrance testing) sounded more like the white man's burden than realistic concern for the plight of recent immigrants attempting to find work in twenty-first-century Canada. I must add that a new initiative by the college system, Colleges Integrating Immigrants to Employment (CIITE) is underway and steadily releases report after report on the necessity of welcoming students into the college system. Although CIITE is investigating credential recognition, language benchmarking, competency assessment and Francophone issues, it is not addressing gender or systemic racial inequality.

In some media organizations, it appeared to me to be the *not in my backyard* syndrome that was holding back some newspapers and broadcasters from offering my students work placements. Although the vast majority of media executives supported the official goals of the program, the actual work of mentoring diverse journalists received much less support than I originally anticipated. The problems arose when official multiculturalism policy came bang up against the realities of large organizations and Canadian workplace culture. “Welcome to our country, but stop at every door to success.” The dual discourse of multiculturalism in Canada was evidently in play.

Looking back over the last four years, I remind myself, more or less constantly, that the journalism program for internationally trained writers and the Centre for Internationally Trained Individual, which it spawned, are a success. First the Ontario government funded the Canadian

time, we received about \$3.5-million in funding over a two year period.

I began to feel like Dr. Strangelove. The idea was so simple, as the good doctor would say: admit highly educated professionals into an English language program that was specific to their profession, and if they passed, send them onto a uniquely- designed college-level academic program in their field of expertise. After that they would be offered a work placement and hopefully a job in their field. Unfortunately, like the doomsday trigger that Dr. Strangelove could not undo, I could not unravel the complexities of emotions around immigrants and multiculturalism in Canada. Eventually it submerged much of my time in the politics of rejection. Doors that I believed would be wide open, were continually slammed shut. Although every agency in Canada from the Conference of Board of Canada to the Maytree Foundation has signaled that by 2011 immigrants will account for 100 per cent of the net growth in Canada's workforce, there is a huge disconnect between this reality and how native-born Canadians respond to ensuring that business, industry and academia will be in a position to actually fill those jobs with newcomers—most of who are people of colour.

The “bridging” policies, as civil servants and politicians conceive them, theoretically are nothing short of brilliant. The Liberal party won election after election due to the perception that they were the party that understood immigration and defended it during hard economic times, encouraged it in healthy economic times. However, as Marina Jimenez points out her article “Immigrants’ Loyalty to Liberals Waning,” “Immigrants, once a bedrock of support for the Liberals, no longer automatically vote for the party, loosening an allegiance that dates back to the Trudeau era” (A11) (and I might add before 1968). During the 2008 federal election all parties vied for the immigrants

vote even though as Jimenez says: “The old Progressive Conservative Party—and the Reform Party—were seen to have an anti-immigrant bias. The image wasn’t entirely fair as prime minister Brian Mulroney increased the annual intake of immigrants to 190,000 in 1989, from a low of 88,000 under the final year of prime minister Pierre Trudeau’s government in 1984” (A11).

When my college received the \$3.5-million grant from the federal government in 2007, we were one of many organizations in the GTA region of Halton-Peel (which includes the cities of Mississauga, Brampton, Oakville,

average in 2008 than their Canadian counterparts, despite having typically higher levels of education,” reports *The Globe and Mail*. “The gap for immigrants who arrived in the past five years is much greater as it is for those with university degrees” (see Friesen and Grant B5). In fact, immigrating to Canada with a university degree predicts a huge wage gap for newcomers with the difference being 16.4 percent less than their Canadian-born counterparts. No wonder an estimated 25 percent return to their home country in the first three years after immigration. At the Sheridan Centre for Internationally Trained Individuals

Until Canadians are willing to address that fact that multicultural policy is not a substitute for effectively dealing with racism, the underground racism that thrives in our country today will continue to afflict our land and every new immigrant who lands here.

Burlington and Milton) to receive federal funding to help immigrants settle and obtain jobs in Canada. In fact \$38-million was given to Halton-Peel region alone from October 2007 to March 2010. Overall the federal government is providing \$1.3-billion in settlement funding over five years. At the same time, the province of Ontario pledged a total of \$920-million over five years to help immigrants find jobs in Ontario.

The big question is if this huge amount of money is actually helping immigrants in Canada? Looking first at the immigrant women in the journalism program or the Centre for Internationally Trained Individuals, it would be impossible not to see the progress newcomers are making, both in terms of their language and in terms of coming to grips with Canadian culture. After the first year of the journalism program, 65 percent of the students had a job in the media or a related industry.

Women enrolled at the Sheridan Centre for Internationally Trained Individuals benefited the most from our programs since the barriers facing them were so enormous. Similar to their male classmates, all the women that I met in the journalism, accounting or Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs that we offered, were highly educated with one and sometimes two degrees. The majority entered Canada on the basis of their own (and their partner’s) points, that is education, finances, proficiency in reading, writing and speaking English rather than on the family reunification policy. Despite the fact that both the men and women in our classes were allowed to emigrate to Canada because of their professional degrees and experience, every door had been slammed in their faces by the time they reached our Centre. Many newcomers are bitter and disillusioned when we first meet them. “A recent study released by Statistics Canada in November 2009 shows immigrants earning \$2.28 per hour less, a difference of 9.6 percent, on

it’s our job to convince them that further ESL training will make the difference along with an Ontario college education in their field.

What actually happens, however, is that the immigrant learns English fluently, attempts to acculturate to Canadian society but still experiences tremendous barriers finding work commensurate with her education and experience. The high-level multicultural policies of governments have streamed literally billions of dollars into settlement funding. But the barriers remain—and in my experience—they are not coming down. Systemic racism is not affected by high-level policies. Be they colleges or universities, daycare centres or newspapers, the quiet, steely-eyed racism that excludes people of colour or non-traditional religions from the Canadian workplace, at a level commensurate with their experience and education, appears to be sturdier than all the funding policies of government has the power to dislodge.

The issues that the Writers in Exile Conference in Ottawa raised Six years ago are just as pressing today as they were in 2004. Writers and journalists arrive regularly from states where freedom of the press is feared rather than valued and which threaten their livelihood and often, their very lives. Every immigrant writer that I have met aspires to resume her career in Canada and yet to this day I have witnessed only a select few who have successfully done so at the financial level that sustains them and their families while socially raising their status in the mainstream of Canadian society. Some succeed because they are so tirelessly persistent in breaking down racial barriers that it is my belief that they frighten managers into giving them jobs. Others get there by luck; a few by personal contacts who happen to have real power at the decision-making level of organizations and businesses. However, until Canadians are willing to address that fact

that multicultural policy is not a substitute for effectively dealing with racism, the underground racism that thrives in our country today will continue to afflict our land and every new immigrant who lands here.

My worst fear is that as the western world is struggling out of global depression the open purse strings of government supporting settlement and bridging programs will silently, and without fanfare, close. New statistical studies will appear that illustrate that dollar-for-dollar the generous bridge-to-work programs are a waste of taxpayers hard-earned dollars particularly when government debt loads are at the highest levels in years. James Bissett, a former executive director of the Canadian Immigration Service reminds us "there's a backlog of nearly a million applicants waiting to get in. More than half of recent immigrants are already living below the poverty line" (qtd. in Martin A15). Bissett argues that, "2.5 million immigrants who arrived in Canada between 1990 and 2002 received \$18-million more in government services and benefits than they paid in taxes" (A15). *Globe and Mail* columnist Lawrence Martin adds that Bissett "agrees Canada has a humanitarian role to play, but his view is that it is better done through greatly increased foreign aid than adding 300,000 job seekers in difficult times" (A15).

As more and more Canadian-born workers are displaced from their traditional jobs, I suspect, they will become the main focus of government policy and funding. The unemployed and underemployed offer up many more votes than the approximately 250,000 immigrants who arrive here every year—and it's always easier to cap immigration than it is to fight racism, particularly at a grassroots level where social activism wedded to government policy is the key ingredient that most traditional politicians and bureaucrats prefer to ignore. If multicultural policy remains the purview of partisan politics rather than a true, unfettered intention to level the playing field for all people of every race, ethnicity and religion in Canada—and not as a means to garnering votes but as a path to a truly democratic society—then it looks to me like immigrants, particularly women who are the most vulnerable to funding freezes, are in for a very rough ride here in the years to come.

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ROBERT F. THIMMESH

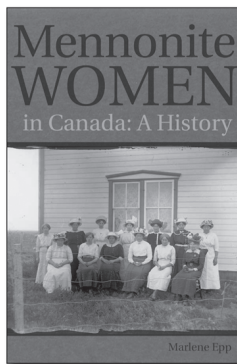
The Crumbs of Civility

She pushes
the cart through a neon
red doorway
with a yellow bucket
of suds
and a stack
of cheap plastic sheets;

each night
she wipes
the tables clear
of civilization's crumbs
unnoticed
unsung
her quiet way
cleans a countered
corner
for the next
encounter of civility.

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FEIZIYA PATEL

Who am I, Canadian woman?

my white washed, western flavoured, gendered other
thriving in her crystal space between the cracks of my aging skin
loving with the passion that awakes my inner being
laughing in the hollow halls of my childhood memory

Who am I, Canadian woman?

I am

prisoner in my multicultural reserve like the first peoples of this land
silenced voice heard through your mind
colourful immigrant living across the colour line
Arab, Pakistani, Indian, Mexican, Asian, African silhouette reflected in the pupils of your eyes
accented voice garbled in your head
dark, brown, black, racialized other

Who am I, Canadian woman?

I am

immigrant in purdah who veils her sexuality from your gawking men
Philipino nanny snatched from the mouth of her baby
hurried heartbeat of multiple lifetimes that you have never lived
statistical blots in your immigrant research data
undernourished refugee who starved for western freedoms
anti-terrorist who bled for white, frail democracies

So now you know who I am, Canadian woman.

But how am I?

hungry because you won't share your bread
Bleeding from gaping wounds on my soul
tired shadow, your unacculturated other

Feiziya (Fay) Patel was born in South Africa. She is a new immigrant in Canada and a migrant worker in Australia. Fay has over 25 years of international experience in higher education in Canada, the United States, New Zealand and South Africa as a professor, researcher and program manager across several disciplines. Her co-edited book, Working Women: Stories of Strife, Struggle and Survival, which reviews the challenges of women's work in a global context, was released by Sage Publications in January 2009.

SHEILA STEWART

Unnaturally warm

for January, more than a thaw. The weather is wrong.
We smile, then grimace. *Eerie*, says my neighbour. *Like March*.

An old woman rakes her lawn. The icebergs melt. Anything
can happen. We are canaries, singing off tune, our coats

fluorescent yellow.

Sheila Stewart's first poetry collection, A Hat to Stop a Train, was published by Wolsak and Wynn in 2003. Her poetry has appeared in such journals as The Antigonish Review, Canadian Woman Studies, Descant, Fireweed, The Malahat Review and Tessera.