Lest We Forget: Politics of Multiculturalism in Canada Revisited during COVID-19

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Abstract
Since COVID-19, we have witnessed a rise in hate crimes and xenoracism globally. Some commentators on COVID-related racism claim that this hate is apolitical. We question this claim, and in this paper, we strive to reveal the underlying politics especially around the ramifications and impact of this hate on racialized (im)migrants and the multiculturalism ideal. Drawing from Foucault’s construct of biopolitics and using Canada as a case study, we wonder how Canadian multiculturalism, which is a source of national pride, has been politically constructed to serve white settler hegemony from its inception to the present. We link political debates around the emergence of a multiculturalism policy in 1971 to the recent debates on multiculturalism and immigration during the 2015 and 2019 federal elections, and the current COVID-19 related national border policies in 2020. Our critical analysis illustrates how immigrants and racialized minorities have been systemically positioned in our legislation as a site to demonstrate the politics of governance, often scapegoated for national unrest and questioned on the legitimacy of their belonging and contribution to the nation. Meanwhile, the very ideal of multiculturalism in Canada has been evoked as the centre of biopolitics to govern ‘Others’ and all.

Keywords
Biopolitics, multiculturalism, racism and xenoracism, COVID-19, Canada, public policy, immigration

Introduction
The outbreak of COVID-19 has changed the world – millions of lives and jobs lost and unprecedented new norms created, pushing us to re-think national and moral borders and to
re-visit diversity, humanity and human rights. There has been an outcry about increased hate crimes, racism, and xenophobia globally (Serhan and McLaughlin, 2020). COVID-19, originated in China and spread to other Asian countries and then to Western countries, which resulted in the construction of a projected image of the virus/‘danger’ being located in Chinese/Asian bodies, and a subsequent mislabelling of COVID-19 as the Chinese/Asian virus. This resulting bias that persons of Chinese/Asian descent carry the virus, even if they did not visit the virus epicentre locations or show pandemic symptoms, has situated them as targets for violence (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Furthermore, this projection and violence linked to Asian bodies has been expanded onto (im)migrants especially racialized bodies, mislabelled as the ‘foreign virus,’ even though they were citizens of non-Asian nations for generations. For example, on 28 February 2020, Italy’s La Lega party leader Matteo Salvini conflated Italy’s burgeoning outbreak with the recent arrival of a migrant boat from North Africa and demanded an anti-immigration policy although at that time Italy had 288 reported cases of COVID-19, while the whole of the African continent had just a single case (Davis, 2020). In Nova Scotia, Canada, the Premier Stephen McNeil and Chief Medical Officer Robert Strang named predominantly African Nova Scotian communities as locations of concern for COVID spread with no signs for this claim (McSheffrey, 2020).

The pandemic is a global ‘health’ crisis (WHO, 2020) yet it is also a global ‘human rights’ crisis, since it has significant ramifications for racialized people and immigrants during and even after the pandemic. When faced with COVID-related racism, pervasive discourses in Canada include the idea that, since Canada has multiculturalism as a national policy, we are ‘different’ from those south of the border (i.e., the Trump administration), thus positioning Canada as a benign nation. Alternatively, some puzzlement is expressed at the eruption of pandemic-related racism as if this violence is exceptional to Canadian multiculturalism. In either discourse, Canadian multiculturalism is at the center of the debate.

What does multiculturalism mean in Canada and how has this construction been challenged during the pandemic crisis as we witness a rise in racism and xenophobia? The official document by the Library of Parliament defines Canadian Multiculturalism as follows:

The concept of Canada as a ‘multicultural society’ can be interpreted in different ways: descriptively (as a sociological fact), prescriptively (as ideology) or politically (as policy). As a sociological fact, multiculturalism refers to the presence of people from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Ideologically, multiculturalism consists of a relatively coherent set of ideas and ideals pertaining to the celebration of Canada’s cultural diversity. At the policy level, multiculturalism refers to the management of diversity through formal initiatives in the federal, provincial, territorial and municipal domains (Brosseau and Dewing, 2018: 1).

According to the 2019 Census data (Statistics Canada, 2019), Canada’s population growth relies heavily on immigrants (82.2%): Canada admitted 313,580 immigrants in 2018/2019, one of the highest levels in Canadian history. The 2016 Census data highlighted the increased diversity reporting more than 250 different ethnic origins and more than one out of five Canadians are born in foreign countries. Also, Canada is the first country to pass a national multiculturalism law in 1988 and has upheld it since as the national policy. Thus, sociologically and ideologically, Canada is a multicultural society. However, we argue that, at the policy level, managing diversity has been more tenuous, fluctuating between promoting and dismissing multiculturalism, even at times reflecting anti-multiculturalism.

During the pandemic, we have witnessed an important juncture in Canadian multiculturalism around multiple levels of racism and systemic inequity. Is this pandemic-related racism and violence against (im)migrants and racialized people a new scenario that threatens Canadian multiculturalism or an ongoing never-ending story lest we forget? More fundamentally how can we
understand Canadian multiculturalism – is it born from liberal, humanitarian and democratic good will? Or capitalism in a global neoliberal era melded with a post-colonial agenda? To explore these questions, we use Foucault’s construct of biopolitics as a theoretical framework, conduct a critical review of Canadian multiculturalism from its emergence to the present and illustrate how multiculturalism has always been tenuous and is subject to re-shaping during the current pandemic crisis.

Biopolitics: The Art of Governing during Unrest

Foucault was concerned about how power operated over people and society. In ‘Discipline and Punishment’ (1977), Foucault explains how traditional sovereign power over actual life and death has been replaced with *disciplinary power*. It is not a weapon that threatens lives, but rather a way of governing and managing (often detrimental to) people that set out ways of existence while marking certain dominance as the norms. Through technologies of power over self (e.g. moralization) and over others (e.g. punishment), individuals internalize this disciplinary power and learn to behave in orderly ways that leads to docile subjects and a disciplined society. In his later works, ‘The History of Sexuality (I)’ (1978) and ‘The History of Sexuality (II)’ (1984) Foucault further theorized his understanding of power relations with the concept of *biopower*, which articulates a shift in the use of power from the maintenance of ‘authority’ and control towards the maintenance and control of the ‘population’. Instead of devising social control, biopower focused on the administration of the population’s life, economic activity, productivity, health and mobility. In this section we briefly unpack his theorization of power and its potential in understanding the dynamics of multiculturalism under COVID.

Analyzing the government’s long history of emergency responses to outbreaks and epidemics of illness in the eighteenth century, Foucault (1977) noticed that, instead of ‘managing infectious individuals’ during epidemics, the ‘management of plague’ placed not only the infected individuals but also the general population in its totality as the centre of a disciplinary mechanism. To Foucault (1977: 198), ‘the plague is met by order’: The management of plague requires multiple divisions of the population and of space, a process Foucault called ‘partitioning’ which increased the ‘organization in depth of surveillance and control’ of these divisions, and while not sustaining punishment it entailed disciplinary power as ‘an intensification and a ramification of power’. According to him, this disciplinary power is exercised in two ways. One is through invoking ‘normalizing judgement’ (177). Its purpose is the creation of a docile body/obedient subject specific to the condition of the pandemic through both the fear of punishment (e.g. fine, imprisonment) – that is, power exercised by outside – and the moralization of conduct – that is, power exercised by inside. Thus, the disobedient body is labelled as irresponsible, immoral and even criminal in contrast to the obedient body of the responsible, moral and ‘livable’ people. Thus, Foucault argues that the goal of the management of a plague looks like it’s containment but in reality, the goal is for a ‘disciplined society’ (199) in that the epidemic of plague becomes envisaged as a laboratory to test an ideal opportunity to exercise disciplinary power over a population.

In *The History of Sexuality II* (1984: 138), Foucault further theorizes that biopower ‘foster[s] life or disallow[s] it to the point of death’, while managing ways of life and marking certain ways as norms of being. He defines biopower as the ‘explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the *subjugation of bodies* and the control of populations’ (140, italics added) while highlighting ‘bio’ in his theorizing again in two basic forms: One is the ‘anatomo-politics of the human body’ centring on the discipline of bodies aimed at producing docile bodies; and the other is the ‘biopolitics of the population’ centring around regulatory controls aimed not at individual bodies but at the management of population. Why did the body become significant in the exercise of power over populations? According to Foucault, since the shift from sovereign power to
disciplinary power over people emerged with the birth of capitalism in the eighteenth century, the health of the population was considered as ‘the foundation for protecting and augmenting the productive economic forces of the state’ (Horton, 2020: 1389). Thus, he wrote that the ‘imperative for health’ was ‘at once the duty of each and the objective of all’ and ‘the body is a biopolitical reality’ (1389). Biopower thus works precisely through ‘the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life’ over populations (Foucault, 1984: 140). We later illustrate how the politics of body has been deployed to exercise governing power before and during the global health crisis of COVID around Canadian multiculturalism.

Interrogating this administration of bodies and its process of ‘governing and being governed’ – an art of governing – has attracted critical scholars. Recently several scholars offer an illuminating perspective on the conception of the ongoing management of the COVID-19 pandemic (Horton, 2020; Kakoliris, 2020; Larsen, 2020; Lorenzini, 2020; Presiado, 2020; Van den Berge, 2020). During the pandemic, the administration of bodies, especially foreign and/or racialized bodies, became symbolized as administering a threat/danger to the legitimate community of ‘right’ citizens/bodies and was contested within and across national borders, constructing another global pandemic, racism.

Witnessing racism spreading across the globe with COVID, critical scholars voiced concerns around the spreading crisis of humanity, equity and multiculturalism (Devaskumar et al., 2020a, 2020b; Lee and Johnstone, in press). We echo this call of crisis and the urgency to mend and restore justice, humanity and diversity. At the same time, we cannot fail to notice a familiar pattern of governing: whenever a crisis, inconvenience and/or discomfort occurs racialized others become a target using a governing tactic of seemingly benign and paternalistic intent, but deeply rooted in white supremacy and a capitalistic nationalist agenda. This serves to govern not only ‘Otherized’ people but also all the population since it looks like governors are doing something (i.e. blaming Others), thus distracting from systemic inequity and shortcomings, while legitimising the current inequitable governance. Canadian multiculturalism is such an example, which we use as a case study to illustrate the art of governing during social unrest. Furthermore, we argue that the very notion of Canadian multiculturalism has served to silence people (i.e. created the docile subject) who highlight the systemic inequity and flaws in multiculturalism from the emergence to the present, and this weak foundation has led to the very rationale of its existence continuously contested since its inception and questioned during COVID.

We selected three political junctures closely relevant to Canadian multiculturalism: (1) the emergence of multiculturalism in 1971; (2) the recent two federal elections with the so-called feel-good policy in the 2015 election that positioned Canada as one of the forerunners to receiving refugees amidst the global refugee crisis and the 2019 election, which highlighted a division around addressing promises of admitting refugees and immigrants; and (3) the current pandemic era in 2020 and onward. Each juncture bears multi-scalar complexities of polities and contexts. By no means, are we claiming a comprehensive review of each of these complicated politics, rather, we seek to illustrate technologies/mechanisms of governing people – not only racialized others but all populations by deploying multiculturalism in Canada.

A Birth of Multiculturalism as a Site of the Legitimacy

In 1971, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau announced Canadian multiculturalism to the House. In the 1960s, there was an explosion of activism on social and cultural rights. For example, the Canadian Bill of Rights was introduced in 1960 and prohibited discrimination for reasons of race, national origin, colour, religion or sex. In 1970, the Canadian government ratified the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (Dewing, 2013). This
zeitgeist of recognising human rights and ending discrimination would seem to pave the way towards the announcement of a Canadian multiculturalism policy in 1971. However, there were other political currents that were equally, if not more, influential that are often overlooked – (1) the new wave of non-White immigrants which constructed a split between earlier and recent immigrants/citizens; (2) the heightened conflicts between the two founding settler nations, the British and French; and (3) the Indigenous autonomy movement – all of which precipitated a federal government push for containment. Since its emergence racism and multiculturalism have been set in motion side-by-side, yet it is not surprising given its little told story as below.

In 1962, the White-only racial discrimination clause in Canadian immigration law was removed as decreased immigration from Britain and Europe resulted in a need for an increased labor pool. Immigration was opened to Africa, Asia, the West Indies, the Middle East and South America and the demographic composition of urban Canada changed (Knowles, 2015). These changes opened a debate between earlier settlers (mostly White) and recent immigrants (mostly non-White) around belonging and citizenship. Although the ‘merit-based points system’ to approve immigrant applications was introduced in 1967, upward mobility opportunities for racialized newcomers were limited to non-existent (Portes, 1977). The new immigrant labor contributed to an oversupply of unskilled labor as highly skilled immigrants (with high merit points) could not access employment reflecting their credentials, and this weakened the bargaining position of the domestic workforce and curtailed unionism.

Quebec Nationalists watched the crumbling European Empires and the newly emancipated states of Africa and Asia and recognized that their province was very similar to that of a colonized state and in 1960 began calling for Quebec independence (Jones, 1998). A climate of fear was created by the formation of the Front de Libération du Quebec (FLQ), a militant separatist group whose violent tactics included blowing up railway tracks and delivering letterbox bombs. In 1968 the sovereigntist Parti Quebecois was established by Rene Levesque. This so-called quiet revolution in Quebec prompted the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, which resulted in Bill C-120 (Official Languages Act) making both English and French official languages in Canada (McRoberts, 1998).

Another domestic political challenge was the struggle for Indigenous autonomy. Having fought for Canada in both World Wars, First Nations peoples began to voice their dissatisfaction with demands for self-government and government recognition of treaty land claims (Turner, 2013). In 1969, Trudeau’s Government introduced the White Paper, which proposed that the Indian Act be abolished, purportedly to give First Nations peoples the same rights as other Canadian citizens. This was unequivocally rejected by First Nations Chiefs across Canada as it would destroy their First Nations status, cancel their treaty agreements and undermine their quest for greater autonomy. These losses would far outweigh any gains that citizenship might give them (York, 1989).

In the face of these multiple threats to Canadian unity from First Nations peoples and from French Canadians as well as the dissatisfaction amongst new immigrant non-White groups, the announcement of a multicultural policy expediently created a new dominant rhetoric to override the differences, thus creating an ethos of justice and equity for all Canadians (Dewing, 2013; Lentin and Tittley, 2011; Pillay, 2015). As Foucault (1977: 199) argues, the apparent goal of the management of conflicts is containment, but in reality, the goal is for a ‘disciplined society’ and those tumultuous periods are used as a laboratory to test the exercise of disciplinary power over racialized others and all Canadians.

Noteworthy is the length of time it took to announce multiculturalism as the national policy and the immediate reaction against this policy. The introduction of multiculturalism in 1971 was succeeded by the changing population demographic, which was witness to an acceleration of visible racism. This resulted in a reassessment of the backbone of multiculturalism from ‘tolerance of
others’ to ‘freedom from discrimination’, which was then conceptualised as a ‘right’ and was entrenched in the Charter in 1982. Seventeen years later in 1988 this was embedded in the Multiculturalism Act. However, ongoing racism has persisted. For example, at the provincial level, the Ontario New Democratic Party (1990–1995) was committed to implementing the Employment Equity Act (1986) and set up provisions for Indigenous people, people with disabilities, members of racial minorities, and women. The immediate backlash is reflected in the Editorial in the Toronto Star, 11 November 1993, which headlined ‘White men need not apply’ and accusations of ‘reverse racism’ concluded with accounts of White men who put their lives on the line for Canada during the war and were now excluded from the job market. This backlash resulted in the election of the Ontario Progressive Conservative Party in 1995, and the new government launched an ideological assault against the Employment Equity Act, resulting in its appeal. Multiculturalism was thus deployed to exercise power over not only otherized groups but also dominant groups (e.g. white men), with a zero-sum multiculturalism-based rhetoric around ‘allowing immigrants to access services means losing the power we/dominant groups used to have,’ as if the history of power originating mostly from the white-settler patriarchal colonial heteronormative state was non-existent. Therefore, from its emergence, the biopolitics of multiculturalism has governed not only ‘Others’ but also all populations in Canada. What we describe next is how all three spheres of underlying conflicts with communities of racialized immigrants, francophone in Quebec as one of the two founding groups of a white settler nation, and Indigenous people which were the initial impetus to the emergence of multiculturalism policy continue to be locations of conflicts and tensions questioning the very notion of multiculturalism in the current political juncture in Canada.

**Multiculturalism Contested during the Immigration and Refugee Crises**

The two faces of multiculturalism become even more apparent in recent immigration policies: immigrants are portrayed as contributors to nation building boosting the economy and at the same time as public threats at times even ‘criminals.’ For example, the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration of Canada (CIC, 2014) said in the 2014–2015 Report on Plans and Priorities for Citizenship and Immigration and Multiculturalism that:

> The Government of Canada is focused on creating jobs and opportunities by protecting the economy, keeping taxes low, and ensuring the health, safety and security of Canadians. Immigration remains central to that focus. The plans outlined in this report will ensure the immigration system fuels Canada’s future prosperity, as we also maintain our generous family reunification and humanitarian record.

In this speech, the focus is exclusively economic (e.g., ‘economy’, ‘taxes’), and the image of Canada as a strong multicultural society – here highlighted with ‘our generous’ immigration system – is then used as a neoliberal marketing tool for generating revenue for nation building (‘future prosperity’).

Much of the legislation at the same time, however, reveals the opposite to ‘generous family reunification’ and a ‘humanitarian record’. In the Strengthening Canadian Citizenship Act (2014), the reforms are actually focused on preventing what they call ‘fraud’, which is illegal entry or illegal residency in Canada. CIC has previously implemented two acts to protect program integrity: (1) the Protecting Canada’s Immigration System Act (2012), which facilitates the prosecution of human smugglers and (2) the Faster Removal of Foreign Criminals Act (2013), which limits review mechanisms for foreign nationals and permanent residents who are inadmissible on such grounds as serious criminality and denies temporary resident status to foreign nationals.
While the rhetoric claims that this ensures ‘the safety and security of Canadians,’ supports integration and ensures better preparation to participate in Canada, critical scholars suggest that the acts prevent people who are not seen as ‘ideal’ Canadian citizens from entering Canada. For example, regarding Bill-S7: Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act, a critical scholar Bhuyan (2015) elegantly argued at the Citizenship and Immigrant Committee that violence against women and children occurs in all cultures, groups, and societies, and in most cases cultural values are used to justify and carry out the abuse. I wish we could say with confidence that violence against women was un-Canadian, but if you look at the rates of rape, sexual assault, harassment, violent spousal assault, and homicide – specifically by male spouses, or former partners, against their female spouses – this is a Canadian problem.

She strongly recommended that the committee remove the phrase ‘barbaric cultural practices’. Despite strong activism from many sectors and individuals supporting immigrants, Bill S-7 has been a law in Canada since 2015. This kind of gate-keeping legislation which facilitates deportation and breaking families echoes the inhumane treatment of immigrants and racialized others in Canadian history such as Chinese Head Tax imposed on families of Chinese immigrants while they were building the trans-Canada railways between 1885 and 1923 (Li, 2008), the internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II (Adachi, 1991), and the genocide of Indigenous People through residential schools for seven generations and the 1960s scoop that places their children with non-Indigenous families through child protection services (FRTRCC, 2015). Despite public apologies to these wrong-doings and verbal commitments of ‘never again’ by the federal government (FRTRCC, 2015), exclusionary policies are being put in place again, controlling ways of being and the place of their bodies. Thus, precisely through ‘the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life’ over racialized others, the biopower works (Foucault, 1984: 140). At the same time, this law projects the image of racialized others as ‘being barbaric’ in the mind of people, thus governing all populations.

The 2014–2015 CIC report above continues that ‘Citizenship is devalued by those who do not intend to establish in Canada, including citizens of convenience’ (a18). It is quite unclear what ‘citizens of convenience’ means and how ‘do not intend to establish in Canada’ could be determined. In this rhetoric, as a technology of control, the government claims a ‘generous’ immigration system: which legitimizes its disciplinary power to decide and gate-keep those ‘who do not intend to establish in Canada’; criminalizes immigrants under these legislations if they are viewed as ‘devaluing’ the system by the dominant gaze; and the responsibility for settlement (i.e., ‘establishing’ after immigration) and its difficulties are placed on individual newcomers. The exclusion embedded in our legislation is projected onto the ones excluded who are even blamed for being excluded (Foucault, 1977).

The federal election is often a site for heated conversation on immigration and diversity where multiculturalism is contested and re-defined. Prime Minister (PM) Justin Trudeau was elected in 2015 and re-elected in 2019. His Liberal party has been featured as a progressive diversity cabinet and has promoted multicultural Canada (Jeyapal, 2018). Amidst the global refugee crisis, Trudeau announced accepting 25,000 Syrian refugees as his 2015 election platform, which gained national and global approval and was featured as the evidence of Canada as a welcoming multicultural country. Janet Dench, Executive Director of the Canadian Council for Refugees noted although this action was ‘uncommon’ garnered Canada a reputation as a world leader on refugee resettlement, this stance is more to do with the fact that the United States has fallen behind around refugee policies in recent years. In fact, once the Trudeau administration reached 25,000, federal funding sponsorship stopped, and more private sponsorship was encouraged (Browne, 2020). Gunter
(2015) critiqued it as the ‘PM’s feel good policy’ since if the same money was sent as aid to countries bordering Syria, we could help 300,000 refugees in camps there, rather than just 25,000. Nevertheless, this policy worked as a governing tactic to all populations holding the view of Canada as a generous multicultural society.

What we also observed in the recent 2019 election is questioning Canadian multiculturalism not only as the policy managing diversity but also as representative Canadian ideology (Brosseau and Dewing, 2018). While Trudeau’s Liberal party mobilized a ‘diversity is our strength’ mantra promising an annual immigrant target of 350,000 to meet labor market demands, People’s Party of Canada’s election platform was calling for ‘the end of the Multiculturalism Act’ and its leader Maxime Bernier announced that he would fence off the areas along the border connected to New York State and Quebec used by illegal migrants, stating ‘It’s not a wall. It’s a fence’ (Campbell, 2019). He promised to reduce the total intake of immigrants and refugees to between 100,000 and 150,000 annually, around one third of the federal Liberal target and, if elected, to eliminate all funding that promotes multicultural Canada for the preservation of Canadian values and culture (Breen, 2019), as if being multicultural is un-Canadian. Accompanied by his image, billboards proclaiming ‘Says NO to mass immigration’ have popped up in major cities like Vancouver, Halifax, Toronto and Regina (Hudes, 2019). Saima Jamal, a Calgary-based social activist who advocates for refugees and immigrants, called it a ‘slap to every immigrant’ and an ‘insult’ to all Canadians. She said the billboard only serves to ‘alienate’ newcomers to Canada. Avnish Nanda of ‘Everyone’s Canada’, a recently founded Alberta non-profit that supports multiculturalism and immigration to Canada, also commented on the billboards threatening ‘foundational Canadian values such as multiculturalism, pluralism and welcoming newcomers’ (Hudes, 2019). Again, multiculturalism is contested as both Canadian and un-Canadian.

What is disturbing is not so much that one conservative party and their supporters are challenging the very value of multiculturalism and immigration but how this increasing anti-multiculturalism and anti-immigrant rhetoric is becoming pervasive across Canada as shown in the findings of several recent polls conducted in 2018–2019. For example, the Angus Reid Institute poll in August 2018 found that half of Canadians wanted to see the government’s immigration targets reduced. The Angus Reid analysis noted the number of Canadians who have opposed and supported immigration as fairly steady over 40 years. Interesting is the difference in public opinion in that in 2014, 36% respondents said there should be fewer immigrants admitted, but in 2018, 49% held this belief (Glavin, 2018). In February 2019, a Leger poll reported almost half saying that Canada welcomed too many immigrants and refugees. Another in June reported 63% saying the government should limit immigration levels because the country was reaching its limit to integrate them. 37% of respondents in Ipsos poll conducted in May reported that immigration was a ‘threat’ to white Canadians (Abedi, 2019; Wright, 2019). Contrary to this sentiment and pervasive discourse, Professor Usha George, an immigration expert and director of the Centre for Immigration and Settlement at Ryerson University pointed out that there is ‘no mass immigration’ to Canada. Many Canadians thought more refugees were admitted than actually were (Moran, 2019). George said that sentiment came from a lack of understanding about how immigrants contributed to the system and from ‘negative propaganda about immigrants’.

Since its inception, multiculturalism policy has been perceived by many Quebecois as another intrusion by federal authorities into their province’s internal affairs, downgrading French co-founder/settler status to the level of other ethnic minorities (Brosseau and Dewing, 2018). A perceived fear of losing the francophone language and identity is described in Jacques Houle’s book, Disparaître? (To Disappear) and has captured the attention of many audiences in Quebec. Houle warns people in Quebec that current immigration levels must be slashed significantly, or Quebec’s French-speaking majority will be in the minority, committing what he calls a ‘demo-linguistic
suicide’ (Nakonechney, 2019). The Institut de recherche sur le Québec, a 2002 think tank that studied ‘the Quebec national question’ and its head of research, right-wing pundit Mathieu Bock Côté, organized a conference in November 2019. This conference showcased French nationalists as slowly reconquering Quebec’s political space. The attack on Canadian multiculturalism has compounded with Quebec’s nationalist movement. Recently Quebec banned visible religious symbols worn by public servants such as teachers and government officials with Bill 21 (June 16, 2019). Étienne-Alexis Boucher, a former Parti Québécois MNA and president of the Mouvement national des Québécoises et Québécois noted that Bill 21 was ‘a pedestal on which we must build’. Given the victory of passing Bill 21, Quebec’s nationalist movement strategized on how to use it to launch a multi-pronged attack on Canadian multiculturalism. Having a premier who isn’t ashamed to call himself a nationalist is more than just a way to pass legislation, Nakonechney (2019) notes it is a sign that Quebec is pushing further back against the ‘federal regime’ and its multicultural tenets.

Indigenous scholar Pamela Palmater (2019) also noted that the 2015 election campaign promised to make Indigenous issues a political priority and yet in the 2019 political platform Indigenous issues were ignored. Prime Minister Trudeau failed to appear for the first leader’s debate and conservative leader Andrew Sheer characterised Indigenous issues as controversial natural resource projects declaring that Indigenous groups were ‘holding hostage’ resource developers, thus perpetrating an aggressive stereotype of dangerousness. The absence of potable drinking water on reserves, the national inquiry into murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls, which found Canada guilty of historic and ongoing genocide, the crisis of an overrepresentation of Indigenous children in foster care, the overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in prisons and the Human Rights Tribunal finding of wilful discrimination against Indigenous children were all issues of prime importance to Indigenous people, which did not appear on the Trudeau platform (Palmater, 2019; Tower, 2019).

What is so clear here is that all three spheres of underlying conflicts – injustice against communities of racialised immigrants, francophone in Quebec and conflicts between the two founding white settler states, and Indigenous people which were the initial impetus to the emergence of multiculturalism policy continue to be current areas of conflict and tension at the turn of 2020. Multiculturalism has worked as a site to exercise the biopolitics of governing all the population – to debate what kind of Canadian ideal population to pursue – in other words who is to be favoured to ‘make live’ and who is to be denied access to services within the state boundary excluding others (e.g., deportation) even to ‘let die’ (Foucault, 1984).

At the Crossroads: Multiculturalism Questioned during COVID-19

In the beginning of 2020, even before WHO announced COVID as a pandemic, more than 9,000 parents signed a petition calling the Ontario school board to keep children whose family members had recently travelled to China home from school for 17 days (Jaynes, 2020). Kerry Bowman, a professor of bioethics and global health at the University of Toronto, called this racism since people should only be isolated if they showed symptoms of illness, not simply because of where their relatives had travelled (Jaynes, 2020). A law professor at the University of British Columbia, Carol Liao (2020) raises concern about the significant rise in hate crimes in Vancouver. Although Anti-Asian sentiment is not new, and many people in Canada have faced this corrosive exclusion, Liao notes that it has now escalated again during COVID-19. She painfully tells that some people are ‘treating COVID-19 as a licence to exhibit their hate, only emphasizing the long history of racism in this city’. In Vancouver, Canada, on 13 March 2020, a 92-year-old Asian man with dementia, was yelled at with comments about COVID-19 and then shoved, resulting in a fall during which he hit his head.
Vancouver police reported that hate crimes against people of East Asian descent in Vancouver doubled in April 2020 (Hager, 2020). On 14 March, an extreme case was reported in Midland, Texas, where three Asian American family members, including a two-year-old and a six-year-old, were stabbed since the suspect thought the family was Chinese infecting people with the coronavirus. Globally, overwhelming numbers of racialised population have been ‘let die’ as a result of insufficient protection during the COVID pandemic (Krieger, 2020). However, this is nothing new in history where infectious diseases (e.g. yellow fever) have been linked with othering and xenophobia (Chotnier, 2020; White, 2020).

Quoting Derrida and Foucault, Presiado (2020) makes a convincing argument that ‘[T]he virus, neither living nor death, neither organism nor machine is always the foreigner, the other, the one from elsewhere’. Presiado takes an example of the epidemic of syphilis in the fifteen-century, which coincided with the European colonial enterprise and launched its destruction and xenocial, male-dominant and heteronormative politics to come: ‘The English called it the “French disease,” the French said it was the “Neapolitan disease,” and the Neapolitans said it came from America; it was thought to have been brought by the colonizers who had been infected by the “Indians.” It was rather the opposite.’ During the COVID-19 pandemic, a similar marriage of virus and racism has occurred in Canada and globally. Human Rights Watch (2020) reported numerous incidents of violence, harassment and xenophobic attacks on people of Asian descent across the globe (also see Lee and Johnstone, in press for detailed examples). However, what we should keep in mind is that the management of syphilis was not achieved by illegalizing prostitution or the confinement of sex workers to national brothels that in fact made them more vulnerable to the disease. Rather, its eradication came with the discovery of penicillin in 1928. Similarly, what transformed AIDS from a pandemic into a chronic disease was the de-pathologisation of homosexuality and women’s right to sexual emancipation (Presiado, 2020). Certainly, the end of COVID will not arrive from this pervasive racist rhetoric. Nevertheless, the pandemic has awakened deeply embedded existing systemic racism in Canada, disputing who is the subject/owner of the nation (thus ‘make live’) and blaming people who are otherized as a threat (thus ‘let die’).

During the pandemic, migrants are, in general, more vulnerable to loss of employment, often have restricted access to health services, have precarious access to housing and less financial capacity to manage. The rise of racism adds further vulnerability to migrants and also becomes a site to debate who is in, who is out, and who is in-between, sharply affecting borders and immigration and the settlement system within the national border, as Foucault (1977) notes the tactic of ‘partitioning’ to create the conditions for implementing biopower.

For example, since 21 March 2020, Canadian borders have been closed except for essential travel. Although it has been gradually loosened, as of 14 August, Public Safety Minister Bill Blair announced the reciprocal restrictions at the Canada–US border until 21 September 2020. Not surprisingly, closing the borders has disproportionately challenged marginalised people like asylum seekers, non-status migrants and temporary foreign workers as well as the most vulnerable populations fleeing danger zones or entrapped in refugee camps facing grave health and safety dangers. Asylum seekers crossing from the United States are being returned to US authorities where they face potential deportation to their countries of origin (Harris, 2020). This scaling border practice has reified the systemic inequity and discrimination for immigrants and has constructed two types of immigrants: First, people who enter illegally (because the border is legally closed) are deemed criminals and the other is people who are granted exception to the border closure (e.g. essential workers in the farms).

To maintain the nation’s food security, the border closure and travel restrictions were exempted for temporary farm and fishery workers acknowledging their essential services to Canadians. In May 2020, over 50 workers tested positive at one produce farm in Kent Bridge, Ontario, and other
farms in Ontario have seen peaks in COVID positive cases, and in Southwestern Ontario several farm workers died. The Mexican government paused the migrant worker program on 15 June, which delayed around 5,000 Mexican workers coming to Canada. Only then did the Canadian government establish safety provisions and medical services so that the flow resumed by 21 June. Noteworthy is that the vulnerability of migrant workers has continued, and several lives were tragically lost even after Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced support for farmers and food industries on 5 May with a federal government investment of $252 million. However, their ongoing poor working and living conditions (e.g. overcrowded and shared living spaces) were not changed and continued to expose them to high risks during the pandemic. Also, on 22 May, the federal government announced the Agri-Food pilot program, which allows non-seasonal farm workers to apply for permanent residency; yet due to its limited scope, this is also criticized as more of a ‘symbolic’ gesture, continuing the longstanding pattern of the Canadian immigration system undervaluing essential economic contributions of ‘low-skill’ agricultural workers (Shields and Alrob, 2020).

As noted by Foucault (1977), to govern is to establish a certain boundary/exclusion that ‘make live and let die’ by ‘partitioning’ to create legitimacy and power over bodies and population. Governing thus simultaneously constructs ‘outside Others,’ who are “barred from the life of the legitimate community” where the recognition of its membership allows one “access to the category of ‘the human’” (Zylinska, 2004: 526). A presence of seemingly inclusive policies (e.g. the Agri-Food pilot program) that are open to racialised others under the name multiculturalism does not mean an absence of partitioning and boundary making. Scaling inclusion policies or making new announcements under the multicultural rhetoric is a continuum of biopolitics in managing others and the population. Galabuzi (2008) notes that inclusive policies do not address exclusion. A presence of inclusive policies is often performing the management of diversity, which thus explains the possible co-habitancy of both inclusive (e.g. multiculturalism) and exclusive (e.g. anti-multiculturalism) policies.

Therefore, COVID and its related border issues reveals how bodies of others are subject to politics of governing that decide their place and conditions of living and not-living; how vulnerable these migrant workers have been while performing essential work pre- and during the pandemic; and this systemic inequity is embedded in our legislation and yet also claimed/portrayed as Canada’s ‘generosity’. Critical scholars argue that ‘the work performed by such temporary workers is deemed essential but the workers themselves are not’ (Shields and Alrob, 2020: 16). Vaughan-Williams (2008) thus rightfully called this border politics ‘the generalised bio-political border’. Supporting the economy and maintenance of the nation is once again picked up by immigrants and racial minorities – replicating the historic pattern of recruiting poorly paid Chinese labor migrants to build the Trans Canada Railroad and splitting families with the Head Tax legislations. Immigrants and racialised others who have often worked in 3-D labour (i.e., Dirty, Dangerous and Demeaning) are positioned to pick up ‘essential’ work during the pandemic, resulting in their high density in 3D+E industries exposing them to much higher risk of COVID infection than workers in other non-essential industries (Shields and Alrob, 2020).

Despite this contribution, the discourse around linking immigration to economic crisis is repeated. For example, there has been media coverage that questions if the Trudeau administration’s signature pledge to take in 350,000 immigrants a year by 2021 can still happen after the pandemic since ‘the public is faced with serious personal economic distress caused by unemployment and savings that have been wiped out’ during the pandemic (Fisher, 2020). The implication underlying these politics is that somehow receiving immigrants is an act of benevolence and generosity that Canada can ill afford during the pandemic crisis as if sustaining the Canadian economy with food supplies harvested by temporary migrant workers has never existed.
In his lecture of ‘Society Must Be Defended’, Foucault (2003) argues that racism is ‘a way of introducing a break into the domain of life taken over by power: the break between what must live and what must die’ (p. 254). Lorenzini (2020) notes that ‘the differential exposure of human beings to health and social risks is, according to Foucault, a salient feature of biological governmentality. Racism, in all of its forms, is the “condition of acceptability” of such a differential exposure of lives in a society in which power is mainly exercised’, thus accurately asserting that ‘biopolitics is always a politics of differential vulnerability’ (italics in original). Despite the claim that COVID is apolitical and an equaliser affecting all, politics around COVID repeatedly demonstrates that COVID is ‘the great unequalizer’ (Devaskumar et al., 2020a, 2020b) and disproportionately impacts racialised others in general and those essential services in particular with higher infection rates and death tolls (Krieger, 2020).

Although the effectiveness of border control as a means to contain COVID was not confirmed and the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) explicitly advised that ‘Travel bans to affected areas or denial of entry to passengers coming from affected areas are usually not effective in preventing the importation of cases but may have a significant economic and social impact’, it became an unchallenged norm across many countries, even being highly promoted by far-right nationalism. For example, on 10 March, President Trump tweeted that ‘this is why I told you we needed to build walls!’ highlighting his signature policy platform ‘we need the Wall more than ever’ (Singh, 2020). It was used to manage and govern displaced refugees and legitimise political decisions to make refugees subject to even worse health crises in quarantine in refugee camps (Makszimov, 2020). The pervasive rhetoric against others and the growing racism, xenophobia and far-right nationalist polities not only manage national borders and state policies but also govern all population influencing perceptions, behaviours and outlook of Canada-to-come, the things Foucault notes as biopolitics.

### Conclusion

While multicultural rhetoric honours diversity and difference and supports toleration and the embrace of multiple traditions and customs, at the same time there is a politicised ‘Canadian ideal’, which dictates what is appropriate, desirable and worthy as a Canadian citizen who can be ‘strangers’ to be accepted versus ‘stranger strangers’ who cannot be granted proximity to the nation (Ahmed, 2012), thus ‘partitioning’ the population into who we ‘make live or let die’ (Foucault, 1984). The rhetoric of ‘immigrants are good for Canada’ in fact has addressed depopulation due to ageing and low rate of birth and fiscal security by recruiting hard-working people who can take over the jobs that Canadians avoid, the points system brings highly qualified, educated and motivated immigrants to boost the national economy and ‘feel good’ national pride is generated by the recent welcoming policy for refugees. However, as illustrated, this rhetoric has been always tenuous and contested particularly during social unrest and so is now challenged again with the outbreak of COVID. A review of Foucault’s theorising on biopower was especially relevant to understand these politics around multiculturalism in Canada as described. During COVID, the administration of racialised bodies in geopolitical borders and all population around their living, working, and health service access has further legitimized the existing dominance in Canada. Rather than taking multicultural Canada for granted, our analysis highlights the importance of an ongoing need to critically reflect on the so-called noble ideals of multiculturalism and the underlying biopolitics to maintain resistance and fulfil the quest for human dignity and inclusivity, which is at a constant crossroads.

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