

BOOK REVIEW

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***Where Race Does Not Matter: The New Spirit of Modernity* by Cecil Foster**

Toronto: Penguin Books, 2005. 211 pp. ISBN 0-14-301769-1

Where Race Does Not Matter is the second of Cecil Foster's three nonfiction books that examine race, racism, and black immigration in relationship to a Canada that is now officially multicultural, but whose founders envisaged it as a country of Nordic Caucasians. The first book is *A Place Called Heaven: The Meaning of Being Black in Canada* (1996). The third book, *Blackness and Modernity: The Colour of Humanity and the Quest for Freedom*, was published in 2007. It is worth noting that immigration is the predominant theme in four of Foster's five novels—*No Man in the House* (1991), *Sleep On, Beloved* (1995), *Slammin' Tar* (1998), and *Dry Bone Memories* (2001)—and in his memoir *Island Wings* (1998). In Foster's own words:

If there's a reason to my writing, it has been to confront [the] pathology [fostered by emigration]. Non-immigrants do not know the emotional cost of immigration. I do, from the time I was two [growing up in Barbados], when the immigration process took my parents. They went elsewhere, well intentioned, in search of a good life, and were devoured by the process. I grew up with the erroneous belief that my parents had gone to a promised land and I would join them. But what it resulted in for me was something of an early metaphorical death, when I realized that my parents were living in what I thought was heaven and had abandoned me . . . only to find out later that they were catching hell—that they had

died, metaphorically. Going to “the promised land” was not life; it was death. What could be more pathological!¹

Where Race Does Not Matter begins with a discussion of the creation of nation states as one of the outcomes of modernity. A consequence of this process was that human beings were categorized into superior and inferior races or, put otherwise, into master races and servile races. It is clear from the very outset that Foster intends to employ *Where Race Does Not Matter* to argue for the merits of multiculturalism, which is presented as an antidote or corrective to the toxicity of modernism. All of Foster’s material is shaped, however, by an implicit eschatological vision of history, a problematic fact for those opposed to such a melioristic view of history.

One of Foster’s goals in writing this book is to inform the reader of the social and political ethos in which Canada emerged. To do this, in 211 pages, as well as make a cogent argument for multiculturalism and project Canada as a utopia where race will not matter, is quite a task. It is one that Foster accomplishes by transforming various historical personages, revolutions, and seminally historical moments into tropes. James Anthony Froude and Jan Smuts on the one hand and Marcus Garvey on the other are employed to illustrate how beliefs about race in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century shaped the views of political leaders and activists at opposite ends of the race debate—in Garvey’s and Smuts’s case, the belief that the races must be separate. Other personages are used for more specific functions: John Simcoe’s failed attempt to end slavery in Canada in 1796 (hence he is a symbol of an embryonic form of egalitarian justice in Upper Canada) but his concomitant success in making Upper Canada a place of refuge for fugitive slaves from the United States; William Arthur Deacon, who epitomizes the belief in Nordic racial superiority and in Canada as a Nordic country par excellence, in contrast to the United States, which is threatened by miscegenation; Mahatma Ghandi, Martin Luther King, and Nelson Mandela, who are interlinked, and who in Foster’s condensed way are symbols of liberation; Pierre Elliott Trudeau, the Canadian prime minister under whose government multiculturalism became Canada’s official policy; and Colin Powell, Kofi Annan, and Condoleezza Rice as blacks whose power is de facto refutation of superior-inferior race ideology.

Foster's mythologizing (myth in the sense of structuring belief) extends to what he sees as seminal dates, 2004 being a salient example. It is the 200th anniversary of the establishment of Haiti and the election of Thabo Mbeki. The first is a reminder that it has been 200 years since a group of slaves had liberated themselves and set up their own country, and the other is the tenth anniversary of the abolition of the system of apartheid, under which blacks were legally defined as inferior beings and a servant class. The abolition of apartheid is central to Foster's argument, inasmuch as Canada until the 1950s seemed to be a country in the apartheid camp, even enacting an immigration policy that excluded nonwhites. (Australia and New Zealand, it should be noted, also had similar discriminatory policies until the 1960s.) Foster extensively documents not only the similarity of the views held on race by the seminal political figures in Canada and South Africa, but also how Canadian policies and laws served as models for the emerging South African nation. In contrast to apartheid as government and ideology, Foster presents Haiti as a model of multiculturalism, and devotes a significant amount of space to discussing the Haitian constitution. In fact some of this space is necessary to counteract the argument, which could be made, that the Haitian constitution discriminates against whites. When we get to the final chapter of Foster's book, we know why the phenomenon of Haiti and the end of apartheid are so vital. On the one hand, Haiti symbolizes the quintessence of multiculturalism, which Foster posits as "the replacement of the phoney differences of the human-owning white-man with blackness, a plural and multicultural state where every person owns his or herself, and where each person lives as freely as humans did before the arrival of a particular type of nation-state with imposed hierarchies and the beliefs that some people are inherently better than others" (177). Apartheid, on the other hand, is the enemy of multiculturalism. Given that apartheid is now abolished, it gives credence to Foster's eschatological schema, which posits a triumphing of the forces of multiculturalism.

Various other myths and symbols contribute to Foster's rhetorical edifice: Babel; the mountaintop (à la Martin Luther King), into which Capetown's Table Mountain is filigreed (one of the chapters is titled "Mountaintops, Valleys, and Multiculturalism"); even black history is made to signify in multiple ways. This is a February like no other: for the year is 2004, a significant date for the end of apartheid and the

inauguration of the Haitian Republic; but it is also the month when “whiteness” forcibly removes Jean-Bertrand Aristide from power. Understood thus, February 2004 embodies not only the elements that justify Foster’s hope for a raceless multicultural Canada but also the forces that could thwart it.

“In an anticipated land of justice, the elements for a just society—where all men and women are free from racism and even racialization—are coming clearer into sight. For this reason, we see the hope that is contained in the dialectics of history and experience” (190). A page later Foster affirms that “for the first time in Modernity, it is possible to envisage the day when Blackness will be viewed positively” (191). On what does Foster found his hope? This is his answer:

What is new is the realization that the current social consciousness has matured, and various provincial bills of rights and federal Charter of Rights and Freedoms speak to this coming of age. Society has determined that it is bad form to treat people in a racist manner. As a group, we have declared that racism is bad morally [and] ethically. (192)

Although I consider *Where Race Does Not Matter* to be a highly informative and valuable book, I see Foster’s vision as overoptimistic. Setting aside what many suspect is the existence of an innate desire to oppress others, there remains the fact that the multiculturalism on which Foster’s vision rests is virulently opposed by the province of Quebec, which actively undermines it in favour of assimilation to a white Québécois culture. Moreover, at the federal level, opposition to multiculturalism was a key part of the Reform Party’s program. The Party now makes up the bulk of the members of the governing Conservative Party, many of whom hold key cabinet positions. Since taking office, the Party has put the word multiculturalism into quarantine. In fact, in the initial cabinet, the multiculturalism portfolio was dropped. Since 1971, when multiculturalism became Canada’s official policy, it was always considered a senior portfolio. Now that the Conservative Party is aggressively seeking the votes of visible minorities, the portfolio has been reinstated as a subministry, but it is headed by arguably one of the most virulent opponents of multiculturalism. As I write this (August 2, 2008), the province of Quebec is still discussing the report tabled by the Bouchard-Taylor Commission, set up by the Quebec Government to explore what it terms “reasonable accommodation.” This Commission

became necessary when the province was plunged into what seemed like a racial crisis in 2007 after 59 percent of all Quebecers admitted to being racist, and bailiwicks across Quebec began passing a spate of resolutions demanding that immigrants not only integrate, but that they recognize the primacy of Christianity. This may well be a temporary re-crudescence—history does not move in a straight line, we’re told—that for the moment casts a bleak shadow on Foster’s vision for a raceless Canadian society.

It can be argued that Foster treats history like a warehouse from which he picks the materials needed for his edifice. This reader does not quibble with the pieces chosen; he does with the weight some are made to bear, and consequently with the structure that has emerged. Of course, this is Cecil Foster’s vision for a multicultural Canada, and however tintured it is by his optimism, it nevertheless carries the warning that multiculturalism must mean more than sententious declarations: that the status quo of *de facto* inequality is intolerable.

NOTE

1. Interview in H. Nigel Thomas, ed. *Why We Write: Conversations with African Canadian Poets and Novelists* (Toronto: TSAR, 2006), 103–4.