UNEQUAL RELATIONS
A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO RACE, ETHNIC, AND ABORIGINAL DYNAMICS IN CANADA

Eighth Edition

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Preface

Canada is a society of paradox. Paradoxes prevail in a Canada that is rapidly changing and increasingly diverse, yet seemingly gridlocked into preferences and perceptions from the past without a definitive blueprint for forging ahead. This assessment is particularly relevant when applied to the domain of race, ethnic, and aboriginal relations. To one side, Canada remains a remarkably open society with a commitment to justice, inclusiveness, and tolerance that is widely admired and occasionally copied (Adams, 2007; Reputation Institute, 2015). This commitment is no mean feat, of course, since few other countries must address such a dazzling array of deeply divided and multilayered diversities, including Aboriginal peoples, national-minorities, and immigrant and racialized groups. But rather than imploding from within as one might expect from such an ethnic tinderbox, Canada is reaping a host of society-building dividends because of its multicultural commitments. It may be a bit of a stretch to equate Canada’s official Multiculturalism with one of history’s revolutionary ideals for reorganizing society; namely, the American, French, and Russian revolutions (Sandercock, 2006). Nevertheless, Canada’s success in integrating immigrants is virtually unparalleled by international standards, with its official policy of Multiculturalism attracting widespread kudos for facilitating successful newcomer outcomes (Kymlicka, 2010).

To the other side, however, racial politics and ethnic confrontations continue to perplex and provoke (Johnson & Enomoto, 2007). Canada’s status as a rich and fertile ground for living together with differences notwithstanding, the challenges of a cooperative coexistence are proving more complex than many had imagined. Every enlightened move forward is matched by a corresponding slip backward, with the result that debates over diversity transcend the simplistic categories of “good” or “bad,” “right” or “wrong,” hovering uneasily between these oppositional poles. The prospect of an uncontested coexistence is compromised by the proliferation of increasingly politicized faith-based communities and ethno-religious identity politics. Aboriginal (or Indigenous) peoples confront socio-economic conditions that, frankly, embarrass Canada’s lofty reputation as a beacon of enlightenment (Anaya, 2014). The so-called “visible” (or more accurately, “racialized”) minorities continue to endure discriminatory treatment, despite assurances and accommodations to the contrary (McDougall, 2009; Satzewich, 2011). Even the widely praised hallmarks of Canada’s diversity agenda—immigration and multiculturalism—have drawn criticism as “too much” or “not enough” (Graves, 2015; Grubel, 2009; Mansur, 2011). Not surprisingly, paradoxes flourish precisely because of a growing reality gap between government promises and the lived realities of migrants and minorities at odds with widespread perceptions of Canada as a global pacesetter in the art of positively managing diversity. The fact that Canada’s proposed principles do not always match people’s lived-experience is the catalyst
that drives the dynamics of race, ethnic, and aboriginal relations—as the following contradictions demonstrate:

- That race once mattered is beyond dispute. That race continues to matter at a time when most Canadians think it shouldn’t or couldn’t is proving a point of contention and confusion (Wallis & Fleras, 2008).
- Racism is widely perceived as a major problem in Canada (Fleras, 2014a). To the dismay of many, its existence has proven much more pervasive and tenacious than predicted, especially with the emergence of new and virulent forms of multi-racisms that are increasingly difficult to detect or eradicate (Agnew, 2007; Bishop, 2005; Henry & Tator, 2010; Hier & Bolaria, 2007).
- References to ethnicity increasingly pivot around the dynamics of competition and conflict rather than cuddly attachments for display in festivals and food courts (Howard-Hassmann, 1999; Maybury-Lewis, 2003). Moreover, concerns mount as ethnic identities and differences become increasingly politicized and pose a governance challenge in proposing to render Canada safe from ethnicity, yet safe for ethnicity.
- No amount of multicultural gloss can mask the obvious: Racialized women and men continue to experience inequities in power, income, and privilege (Block, 2010; Galabuzi, 2006; Jedwab & Satzewich, 2015; Pendakur & Pendakur, 2010; Teelucksingh & Galabuzi, 2005). That a growing legion of foreign-trained professionals are driving taxis or delivering pizzas points to Canada’s mishandling of its immigration “advantage” by transforming a potential “brain gain” into a “brain drain” (Fleras, 2014b).
- Multiple narratives inform the aboriginal experience in Canada (Long & Dickason, 2011). One situates Aboriginal peoples at the forefront of economic and political developments, including a right to confer with first ministers at constitutional talks (Belanger, 2008; Coates, 2015; Frideres, 2011). Another acknowledges how poverty and disempowerment of aboriginal communities remain Canada’s foremost human rights stain (Anaya, 2014; Frideres & Gadacz, 2012). Still another points to a growing militancy among aboriginal activists impatient with the snail-like progress of repairing a still-broken relationship with Canada (Kinoa niimi Collective, 2014).
- Constitutional guarantees for gender equality are commendable, but minority women (including Aboriginal women, women of colour, and immigrant/refugee women) continue to experience concurrent patterns of exclusion and discrimination, especially when gender intersects with race, ethnicity, and class to amplify patterns of exploitation or exclusion (McMullin, 2010; Zawilski, 2010).
- Many regard Canada’s immigration policy and programs as one of the world’s more progressive models (Satzewich, 2015; Simmons, 2010). Canada is one of the few countries in the world that can claim to be both an immigration society and a society of immigrants. Yet the system is increasingly criticized as “broken” and in need of a major overhaul (Bissett, 2008; Hawthorne, 2008; Moens & Collacott, 2008). Yet reforms by the then Conservative government (from tightening up the temporary foreign worker program to creating a new Express Entry pipeline to replace the old points system) have drawn both criticism and praise (Fleras, 2014b). Of particular note are continuing concerns over devising a refugee determination process capable of fast-tracking those in need of Canada’s protection while staunching the flow of those who manipulate the system for expedited entry.
• Canada may be one of the few countries in the world with a formal policy of Multiculturalism. Nevertheless, the domain of multiculturalism remains one of the more politically charged battlegrounds of our era (Ryan, 2010), as demonstrated by debates over the politics of reasonable accommodation when applied to religious differences and faith-based communities (Fleras, 2009a; Stein et al., 2007). Concern is also growing that, in a globalized age of transmigration and diaspora, the relevance of multiculturalism as a place-based governance model is in doubt since immigrant identities and belonging are increasingly disconnected from place and origins (Fleras, 2011b).

• Canada’s commitment to institutional inclusiveness is widely proclaimed and actively pursued. But difficulties undercut this commitment to accommodate by way of workplaces that reflect, represent, and respond to difference, while providing services that are available, accessible, and appropriate. Particularly worrying are institutional structures and unconscious mindsets that remain unmistakably “pale male” in composition, process, and outcomes (Jiwani, 2006; Kobayashi, 2005).

• Canada’s Difference Model is attracting attention as a principled blueprint for living together with differences. At the core of this governance model is the principle of differential accommodation, namely, accommodating different ways of accommodating diversities (Jenson & Papillon, 2001). But diversity has become much more complex because of transmigration, identity politics, and emergent multiversal realities, in effect pointing to the necessity of governance models that are inclusive of diversities-within-diversities (Fleras, 2015).

• Debates over differences continue to question and contest. How much and what kind of differences can be tolerated by society? Conversely, how much imposed unity can it bear? Properly managed, a commitment to accommodate diversity may enhance creativity and connections. Without an overarching vision, however, the clash of differences can torpedo a commitment to community, cohesion, and identity (see Putnam, 2007).

Canada is indeed a paradox insofar as it extols respect for diversity, yet works as one of the world’s premier integration systems (Rao, 2010). The very dynamic that triggers Canada’s strength and pride—which management of diversities may dissolve into weaknesses; conversely, weaknesses, such as Canada’s thin nationalism, may morph into strengths in a globalized world of coming and going. In theory, Canada’s track record on race, ethnic, and aboriginal relations should be getting better (whatever that might mean); in reality, it is not (however difficult that might be to measure). Instead of answers, Canadians are swamped with more questions. In lieu of certainty and resolution, confusion prevails. Canadians express dismay over the proliferation of aboriginal protests and occupations, legal challenges to the status quo, and the mounting anger of a disenfranchised population. English-speaking Canadians are perplexed by Quebec’s seemingly intransigent demands for special status, while the Québécois are equally puzzled by Anglo intransigence over letting go. No less confusing are the increasingly forceful demands of ethnic and racialized minorities who want recognition and respect without sacrificing equality. Finally, newcomers to Canada are experiencing significant difficulties in “making a go of it” despite Canada’s bona fides as an immigrant society of immigration (Fleras, 2014b). However important these issues, nobody can claim to have all the answers. That shouldn’t be a problem; after all, too much reliance on answers assumes a discoverable objective reality that unlocks its “truth” to the privileged observer. But in a mind-dependent world that rejects the existence of objective truth except as discourses within contexts of power, the asking of questions may be just as important as the reassurance of finding answers.
To be sure, Canadians have become increasingly adept at “talking the talk” about living together with differences. Canada’s diversity landscape is peppered with sometimes sanctimonious bromides about “tolerance,” “a post-racial world,” or “celebrating differences” that rarely say what they mean or mean what they say. Yet many Canadians are less enthralled with the idea of “walking the walk”—of putting their principles into practice. Keywords from “inclusion” and “integration” to “racism” and “diversity” are stretched to mean everything yet nothing, without much concern for precision and clarity. Concepts and theories intended to enlighten and clarify are ideologically loaded to the point of ambiguity and misuse, while the persistence of outdated frameworks bears mute testimony to an intellectual inertia best described as a “paralysis by analysis.” The prospects of navigating this conceptual minefield are daunting and people end up “talking past” each other.

This eighth edition of Unequal Relations hopes to avoid the perils of sloppy reasoning, mindless clichés, lazy oversimplifications, and common-sense assumptions at odds with a balanced analysis. Every effort has been made to ground these free-floating concepts in ways that inform rather than inflame, enlighten rather than confuse, and empower rather than disengage. The end result is a critically informed introduction that frames the politics of race, ethnic, and aboriginal relations as fundamentally unequal relations against the backdrop of a complex, diverse, and changing Canada. Three dimensions of this Canada-building dynamic are emphasized: constructed dimensions, contested dimensions, and community dimensions, as follows:

1. A focus on the constructed dimensions reveals how the contours of race, ethnic, and aboriginal relations neither originate in a social vacuum nor unfold outside a wider context. Nor is there anything natural or inevitable about the dynamics of intergroup relations in society. Rather, they constitute socially constructed relationships of inequality within contexts of power, privilege, and property relations. That makes it doubly important to deconstruct the processes by which these fundamentally unequal relations are created, expressed, and maintained, as well as challenged and transformed by way of minority protest, government policy, ideological shifts, and institutional reform.

2. A focus on the contested dimensions envisages Canada as a conflicted site of competitively different groups in competition for scarce resources. Attention is drawn to the competitive struggles of Canada’s three major Diversities (Aboriginal peoples, French and English “charter” groups, and ethnic and racialized migrants and minorities) as they jockey to define priorities, secure interests, coax alliances, and impose agendas. The centrality of power is shown to be critical in driving the dynamics of diversity. Certain groups dominate, not because of genetic superiority but because the powerful can invariably define options and control outcomes. Subdominant groups are subordinate, not because of racial inferiority, but because they lack access to equal opportunity and institutionalized power.

3. A focus on the community dimensions addresses the challenges of constructing a national community of commitment, cohesion, and consensus from a diverse and divided Canada. A principled framework is proposed for living together with differences by advancing the notion of an inclusive Canada that is safe for differences, yet safe from differences.
The content and organization of Unequal Relations subscribes to the adage of “continuity in change.” The first edition of the book was published 25 years ago with the aim of providing a critical introduction to the dynamics of race, ethnic, and aboriginal relations in Canada. Instead of looking at race, ethnicity, or aboriginality as exotic cultures within Canada’s multicultural mosaic, the book was designed to synthesize existing theoretical knowledge with current information to deconstruct the politics of diversity in an increasingly diverse, complex, and changing Canada. Admittedly, much in Canada has changed in the interim. But the book’s animating logic remains unchanged; that is, the importance of analyzing race, ethnic, and aboriginal relations as essentially unequal relations with respect to how patterns of power, privilege, and property (wealth and income) are played out. Clearly, then, race, ethnicity, and aboriginality are not just physical attributes or social categories; more accurately, they constitute distinctive ways of seeing (and of being seen) and understanding (and being understood) the world within a broader context of inequality and injustice. And as long as these predominantly inequitable relations continue to puzzle and provoke, the politics of race, ethnicity, and aboriginality will remain a lively dynamic and contested domain.

Much is retained in this edition, including the basic chapter outline (despite the convergence of several chapters), the content in terms of concepts and applications to Canadian society, and the framing of race, ethnic, and aboriginal relations as socially constructed and fundamentally unequal. The book remains faithful to its core mission. Unequal Relations is neither a description of minority groups nor a catalogue of Canadian ethnic lifestyles. It rarely provides a literary platform for minority “voices” or stories by minority authors, although there is much to gain from such an approach (see Fong Bates, 2005, 2010). To the extent that historical fact is employed, it is history that influences the present rather than a chronology of the past—about the “is” rather than the “was” (Walker, 2001b). Priority is assigned to a macro-sociological study of institutional dynamics, intergroup relations, and power politics rather than micro-models of individual behaviour, personal attitudes, or life experiences. References to diverse ethnocultural groups reflect a focus on relations—from accommodations to conflicts—within a context of inequality and exclusions, thereby drawing attention to the centrality of power to complement that of identity and recognition (Fleras, 2014a). A deconstruction of the logic behind the politics of government policy, institutional reform, and minority resistance is evident throughout, yet the text tries to avoid regurgitating both blatant government propaganda, institutional spin, and ethnic posturing without dismissing the rationale that propelled these dynamics in the first place. Lastly, the text encourages students to critically engage with the paradoxes of diversity politics and the politics of difference—not by examining the issues and debates in the abstract—but through the activism of “painting themselves into the picture” (James, 1998).

Of course, the eighth edition of this text is not without changes—as might be expected in a domain in which the mix of social change with conventional wisdom is rarely constant, often contested, and subject to changes. The usual amendments are in evidence, including revisions, updates, deletions, and additions where necessary. Additional tables and diagrams have been introduced. Diversity data from the 2011 National Household Survey are incorporated whenever possible. A number of Debate boxes and Insight boxes have replaced those of earlier editions in the anticipation of keeping the material fresh and relevant. The text introduces newer concepts and vocabulary such as “multiversal,” “micro-aggression,” “complex (or hyper-) diversities,” “racialization,” “racism 3.0,” “governance,”
infrastructural racism,” “transmigrants and transnationalism,” “differential accommodation,” and “postmulticulturalism”—not because they are fashionable, but because they promote innovative ways of thinking about the politics and dynamics of race, ethnicity, and aboriginality.

The tone of this textbook is constructively yet unapologetically critical, if only to counteract those discourses that uncritically depict Canada as fair, humane, and tolerant (Cannon, 2012; Hedican, 2013). Settler societies such as Canada or Australia routinely rely on national mythologies (or narratives) to paper over (“whitewash”) contradictions of origins and history (Razack, 2002). These self-serving narratives offer explanations that not only justify the colonial project but also rationalize its most destructive aspects, including the displacement and dispossession of Aboriginal peoples by European settlers, the importation of cheap migrant labour for nation-building, and the marginalization of racialized minorities within a white society. Canada is portrayed as an empty land (terra nullius doctrine) that was peacefully settled in ways consistent with the rights of discovery, notions of Eurocentric progress, and the principles of Christian civilization. To the extent that these narratives focus on the innocence and heroism of Western settlement and white entitlement, they reflect a very one-sided view of what really happened (Schick, 2008). Yet most Canadians have been taught to think of Canada as a kind, gentle society of good and just people instead of a “telling it like is,” namely, a colonization project of conquest, expulsion, and exploitation (Cannon, 2012). Fewer still are equipped to grapple with the “mythconceptions” of a Canada that conveniently cloak a white supremacist history behind the soothing balm of “happy face” multiculturalism (Razack, 2004; Thobani, 2007; see also Leonardo, 2004). Even fewer still are capable of seeing how the privileging of whiteness in defining who gets what reinforces the dis-privilege of Aboriginal peoples and the disempowering of racialized minorities. A commitment to unsettling (“deconstructing”) Canada as privileged “white space” makes it doubly important to deconstruct the politics of obfuscation by seeing Canada from the perspectives of those dispossessed and marginalized. It also raises the disturbing possibility that a white Canada is just as capable as any other regime of racially oppressive acts when the situation suits (Hedican, 2013).

To be sure, analyzing these highly politicized topics is neither for the timid nor the politically correct. The interplay of challenge with change invariably inflames passions that puncture people’s complacency over identity and self-esteem, core cultural values, the legitimacy of conventional authority, and taken-for-granted privileges. Nevertheless, a commitment to a critically informed analysis is crucial in adjusting to the realities of a post-modern world, namely, to expect the unexpected, to think the unthinkable, and to cope with the uncontrollable. Ours is the age of diversities and difference, not simply in the descriptive or celebratory sense, but because an increasingly politicized diversity is capable of flexing its muscles in the competition for valued resources. The boundaries of “being Canadian” are challenged by the deep differences and radical ethnicities of a society in the throes of transformative change, with the result being that traditional images and conventional assumptions about Canada are no longer applicable (Fleras, 2015). Moreover, it’s not enough to simply understand the issues associated with the politics of diversity and difference, even when filtered through the prism (lens) of a diverse, changing, and unequal Canada. Emphasis must also focus on putting this knowledge into practice—either supporting or reinforcing a racialized status quo by doing nothing or, alternatively, by advancing a just and inclusive Canada through critically informed activism. To their credit,
Canadians are slowly rising to the challenge of repairing the largely dysfunctional relationship that informs Canada’s dystopian relation to Aboriginal peoples (Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, 2015). Canada is also proving a pacesetter in balancing the concurrent demands and oppositional tensions of a multicultural governance that abides by the principles of inclusiveness. This principled approach to the constructive governance of race, ethnic, and aboriginal relations secures a rationale for living together with differences, respectfully and equitably. It also elevates Canada to the global forefront of countries that are attempting to manage the diversity dividend in ways necessary, fair, and just.

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