

## REFRAMING: TIM McCASKELL (2014)

Seven years is not a long time when talking about changes to notions of race and identity. But the seven years since the publication of *The Great White North* have been dramatic. The financial crisis of 2008 ushered in a period of prolonged recession, international instability, and growing social upheaval. In Canada it has accelerated an already alarming growth of disparity, and as The Colour of Poverty website ([www.colourofpoverty.ca](http://www.colourofpoverty.ca)) points out, that disparity is increasingly racialized.

Landed immigrants are more marginalized and more exploited than immigrants were thirty years ago. Worse, Canada now receives more temporary foreign workers per year than immigrants. We are seeing the construction of a racialized underclass of indentured labourers without access to the most basic rights.

As racial disparities grow so does racism—on a popular level to make sense of those visible disparities, on a policy level to justify and excuse not dealing with them, and on a political level to shield those who most benefit from systemic injustice.

At the same time Whiteness is less and less a free pass. The Occupy Movement signaled the return of class when it identified the “one percent.” Whiteness still provides me with privilege, but increasingly it seems to be of the “grandfathered” variety. Few young White people today can take the nonchalant approach to life that I did and still expect to succeed. As one young man pointed out to me recently, “When you were my age you could take risks; today things are much more competitive.”

When I wrote *Before I Was White* it still seemed possible to assume a convergence of interests between liberal ideas of equal opportunity and more progressive notions of an egalitarian society. But what does it mean to have equal opportunity in an increasingly unequal society? Those two streams seem to be reaching a parting of the ways.

In Europe, the social contract is unraveling even more quickly. Entire populations are being reduced to poverty. At the same time, the continent continues to be a magnet for refugees fleeing economic misery, environmental degradation and political turmoil. We see there the predictable rise of xenophobic and racist sentiments and a resurgence of neo-fascist political formations. Monstrous identities once considered almost forgotten are being reactivated.

But this is not simply a return to the past, a slippage in the modernist trajectory of progress. Neo-liberal class disparities within racialized groups are also more and more profound. There *is* a Black president in the United States. His middle name *is* Hussein. In the White settler states especially, ruling elites *have* become more inclusive. It is no longer remarkable to hear “Brown, Black, and Yellow” speaking from positions of power. But they speak the same language as the more segregated elites before them, and to similar effect on those who do not share their privilege. Racial identities once spoke for class. Now they just as often obscure it.

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This inclusion reflects a new slightly more integrated elite class structure, but also real shifts in balances of world power—economic, cultural and military. The echoes of colonialism and White imperial power are fading. New centres of power compete with declining imperialisms over finite resources. This produces not only a profusion of new identities and chauvinisms, but also increased instability and risk of war.

My article seven years ago focused on the evolution of my identity over the course of a lifetime. It mapped the development of broader social identities available to me. The concluding discussion examined the development of appropriate pedagogical principles to illuminate and challenge racism and other power relationships among white identities shaped by different social forces. But that discussion still assumed a relatively stable field of action, one that is now being increasingly disrupted.

In this new context, the meanings of identity are both more entrenched and less stable. They are also being innovatively deployed by power. Multiculturalism is used to justify homophobia and sexism. Secularism is used to police the behaviour of religious minorities. Gay rights are used to fuel the war build-up against Iran, and promote “ethical” oil from the Alberta tar sands. Feminism is enlisted to justify the invasion of Afghanistan. The Holocaust is mobilized to celebrate ethnic cleansing in Palestine.

Today’s pedagogy must go beyond “challenging stereotypes.” Prejudice + Power is no longer any more an adequate equation today than “Black Yellow Red White; Same Struggle Same Fight” was adequate for dealing with racism in the 1970s. How does our pedagogy grasp the new consolidation and fragmenting of power, the new profusion of identities, and the dangers of devastating war that they threaten? Do we consider our old certainties limited but heuristic propositions and try to build a deeper understanding on them? Or do we have to start someplace completely new based on the experience of learners today?