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Canadian Multiculturalism as Banal Nationalism: Understanding Everyday Meanings Among Sri Lankan Tamils in Toronto

Abstract

Multiculturalism is a contested concept and policy in the current context. Many European leaders have declared its failure, and scholars have traced a global backlash against multicultural policies, especially in Europe. Canadians, on the other hand, are more likely to view it positively, as a badge of citizenship or belonging. *Being* multicultural has become closely intertwined with what it means to *be* Canadian, especially for immigrants and their children. The focus of this paper is to unpack these meanings of multiculturalism among one immigrant group, most of whom are now Canadians, and their children: Sri Lankan Tamils in the Greater Toronto Area. Our aim is to better understand how members of this group view the relationship between their Canadian and Tamil identities in the context of multiculturalism. In particular, we are interested in the 'uptake' of the concept, practice, and policy of multiculturalism among Sri Lankan Tamil newcomers to Canada. Drawing on interviews and focus groups with both immigrants (first generation) and Sri Lankan Tamils born in Canada (second generation), we illustrate some of the ways in which multiculturalism operates as frontstage behaviour and as a more tacit backstage concept among those in the Greater Toronto Tamil diaspora. We argue that Canadian multiculturalism functions as 'banal nationalism' in Canada, as daily practices of tacit nation-building are produced and repeated on a daily basis among Sri Lankan Tamil Canadians.

Résumé

Le multiculturalisme est un concept politique contesté dans le context actuel. De nombreux dirigeants européens ont déclaré son échec, et plusieurs chercheurs ont tracé une réaction générale contre les politiques multiculturelles, en particulier en Europe. Cependant, les Canadiens sont plus susceptibles de considérer positivement ce concept de multiculturalisme et l'établissent comme une composante de la citoyenneté ou de l'appartenance. Être multiculturel est devenue aujourd'hui étroitement liée au fait d'être Canadien, surtout pour les immigrants et leurs enfants. L'objectif de cet article est d'exposer les significations du multiculturalisme parmi un groupe d'immigrants dont la plupart sont maintenant des Canadiens, il s'agit des Tamouls sri-lankais dans la region du Grand Toronto. Notre objectif est de mieux comprendre comment les membres de ce groupe considèrent la relation entre leurs identités (canadienne et tamoul) dans le contexte du multiculturalisme. En particulier, nous sommes intéressés à l'«adaptation» du concept, de la pratique et de la politique du multiculturalisme parmi les nouveaux arrivants sri-lankais tamouls au Canada. On se basant sur des entrevues et des groupes de discussion avec les immigrants Tamouls sri-lankais (première génération) et les Tamouls sri-lankais né en Canada (deuxième génération), nous illustrons quelques-unes des façons dont le multiculturalisme fonctionne comme un comportement de premier plan au début de l'installation au Canada, puis comme un concept plus tacite dans la vie de la diaspora tamoule du Grand Toronto. Nous soutenons que les fonctions du multiculturalisme

canadien, en tant que «nationalisme banal» au Canada, et en tant que pratiques quotidiennes de construction de la nation tacite, sont produites et répétées sur une base quotidienne entre sri-lankais tamouls canadiens.

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INTRODUCTION

Multiculturalism is a contested concept and policy in the current context. Many European leaders have declared its failure, and scholars have traced global backlash against multicultural policies, especially in Europe (Kymlicka 2010). England's Prime Minister David Cameron, for example, argued in 2011 that "state multiculturalism" has encouraged different cultures to live different lives, often "behaving in ways that run counter to our values" and at the expense of a unifying "vision of society to which they feel they want to belong" (BBC News 2011). German Chancellor Angela Merkel similarly argued in 2010 that multiculturalism as a vision for society has "utterly failed" (Weaver 2010). Canadian politicians, on the other hand, view multiculturalism as an object of pride (Trudeau 2013). Canadians themselves are more likely to view it positively, as a badge of citizenship or belonging. While it is true that Canadian multiculturalism receives much academic and cultural criticism (Cameron 2004; Cardozo and Musto 1997), its public support base remains steady at around the 60-70 percent range (Fleras 2012, 317; see also Jedwab 2005 and Nanos 2010). *Being* multicultural has become closely intertwined with what it means to *be* Canadian, especially for immigrants and their children. The focus of this paper is to unpack these meanings of multiculturalism among one immigrant group, most of whom are now Canadians, and their children: Sri Lankan Tamils in the Greater Toronto Area. Our aim is to better understand how members of this group view the relationship between their Canadian and Tamil identities in the context of multiculturalism. In particular, we are interested in the 'uptake' of the concept, practice, and policy of multiculturalism among Sri Lankan Tamil newcomers to Canada and the Canadian-born children of such immigrants.

Selecting Sri Lankan Tamil newcomers to Canada—many of whom fled their homes as refugees—as research participants in a study of Canadian multiculturalism, is intentional. Canada is home to the largest single Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in the world, and most of this group lives in the Greater Toronto Area (Amarasingam 2015; McDowell 1996; Wayland 2004). Multiculturalism was initially coined by the Canadian state in 1971 as a policy to incorporate new cultures and people into its society. It became law in 1988, and has been implemented across Canadian institutions ever since. Today, multiculturalism is embedded and operationalized in schools, law, and other Canadian institutions (Basu 2011; Joshee and Johnson 2008).

Few scholars have examined how immigrant, including refugee, newcomers have taken up this policy and concept and made it their own (or rejected it). Multiculturalism, we contend, is co-constituted by the people it purports to engage.

Multiculturalism, as a deeply contested policy that raises theoretical questions, has engendered a variety of debates and discussion. Several scholars, for example, have argued that multiculturalism is an extension of the 'white settler state' which allows just enough room to be different and accepted by Canadian society, but not enough to change institutional power or challenge patterns of privilege that stem from the settler state and its 'whiteness' (Razack 1998; Thobani 2007). Civic pride in Canada has been identified by scholars with reference to Canada's role as a global peacekeeper (Granatstein 2011), its provision of universal health care as a right, its state enterprise nationalism around gas pipelines (Priestley and DeMille 2013), as well as English Canadian nationalism with respect to Quebec nationalism and related separatist politics (Dufour 2003; Gibbins 1995). There has been relatively less research, however, with first-generation immigrants and their second-generation children born in Canada about how they articulate their identities in Canada and "live" multiculturalism (or not) in their everyday lives. Many scholars have noted that while multiculturalism in Canada may be *popular*, it is also superficial: a multi-cultural ethos rarely moving beyond "saris, samosas, and steel bands" into something more substantial (Donald and Rattansi 1992, 2). One might expect to witness such cynicism among multicultural newcomers, but our research suggests something quite different. Multiculturalism is real and woven into the daily lives of both Sri Lankan Tamil immigrants and second-generation children born in Canada.

Despite the varied, and valid, criticisms of multiculturalism as policy, ideology, and national project reviewed below, we take a step back in this paper and ask a different question: how, if at all, is multiculturalism *enacted* among Canadians who are part of a racialized diaspora and for whom Canada was a country of asylum? When asked what it means to be Canadian, several respondents' first answer was "multiculturalism," yet many also criticized the concept as the interviews proceeded. Based on four focus groups held in 2012 and 52 individual interviews conducted in 2013, we contend that Canadian multiculturalism functions as a kind of Canadian nationalism. For those we canvassed, multiculturalism is a given, a taken-for-granted reality of life in Canada. In a related vein, Reza Aslan writes about his Muslim faith: "as familiar to me as my skin, and just as disregardable" (Aslan 2013, xviii). Scholars of multiculturalism have often taken "disregardable" to mean lacking in importance. Questions about the credibility of multiculturalism and whether it can improve the quality of life for immigrants through better policy-making on immigration issues (Reitz 2014) are important, but we contend that equally vital is an understanding of multiculturalism in action among those to whom it is intended to apply.

Drawing on the interviews and focus groups introduced above, with both immigrants and Sri Lankan Tamils born in Canada, we illustrate some of the ways in which multiculturalism operates as front stage behaviour and as a more tacit back stage concept (Goffman 1973) among those in the Greater Toronto Tamil diaspora (Amarasingam 2015; Wayland 2004). Canadian multiculturalism functions as 'banal nationalism' (Billig 1995) in Canada, as daily practices of tacit nation-building are repeated on a daily basis among Sri Lankan Tamil Canadians. We probe how 'multi-culturalism' as government policy and legislation gets translated into daily routines of school, work, and community activities. Some scholars have dismissively described Canadians as unable to articulate the multiculturalism that they live, and have concluded that multiculturalism does not have enough substance to unify the Canadian polity (Kernerman 2005). Furthermore, there has been debate about whether multiculturalism might actually encourage cultural fragmentation and social isolation (Bibby 1990; Kymlicka 2012; Stoffman 2002). Such approaches to multiculturalism, whatever their normative slant, embrace a state-centric approach, with little regard to racialized immigrants, refugees, and the civil society it aims to shape. This paper chronicles in rich detail some of the routine and taken-for-granted ways in which multiculturalism is referred to among Canadians born of Sri Lankan parents, and those who came to Canada as refugees and other kinds of immigrants. We draw on the concept of banal nationalism as a way to frame our discussion of multiculturalism as an everyday lived idea.

INTRODUCING BANAL NATIONALISM

Michael Billig (1995) coined the term 'banal nationalism' which has proven to be an important theoretical tool for analyzing the production of nationalism in everyday life. For Billig, nationalism is not only something that exists 'out there', undertaken by nationalist movements, 'extremists', or other political actors, but also something that animates the daily lives of those living in the liberal democratic states of the "West," such as Canada. He (1995, 6) argues that the "world of nations is the world of the everyday" and examines the ways in which language used by political leaders and newspaper columnists provide clues for understanding how nationalism functions (ibid.). One of the most incisive images put forth by Billig is his notion of the waved and the unwaved flag. At military ceremonies, the nation-state's flag commands attention: soldiers salute it; people in the audience may stand with their right hands at their chest. Flags in any other context serve a different, and more important, function, according to Billig. No one is likely to stand and salute a photographed image of a flag on a magazine cover lying around a barbershop or any other venue. As Billig (1995, 40) writes, "The uncounted millions of flags which

mark the homeland of the United States do not demand immediate, obedient attention. On their flagpoles by the street and stitched on to the uniforms of public officials, they are unwaved, unsaluted and unnoticed. They are mindless flags." But, for Billig, these mindless flags are actually more important because they form the taken-for-granted wallpaper of our lives, of our individual and group identity.

Billig (1995, 44-45) does not ignore the presence of more "extraordinary moments" which undergird a particular state's nationalist outlook: "All states have occasions when ordinary routines are suspended, as the state celebrates itself. Then, sentiments of patriotic emotion, which the rest of the year have to be kept far from the business of ordinary life, can surge forth." In other words, there are certain days when the nation engages in a kind of "collective effervescence" that can solidify group identity. For Billig, however, these "conventional carnivals of surplus emotion" (1995, 45) do not tell the whole story of nationalism. Rather, what happens in between these celebratory moments matters most. Scholars have identified a variety of these symbols and elements that function to strengthen banal nationalism in everyday life, from food and landscapes (Palmer 1998) to postage stamps (Raento and Brunn 2005), and from architecture (McNeill and Tewdwr-Jones 2003) to road signs (Jones and Merriman 2009).

We contend that Canadian multiculturalism is an important element of Canadian nationalism and identity, if not officially so; Canadians of all stripes consider multiculturalism as a salient element of what it means to live in Canada, even as they criticize and protest its limitations. As Gerald Kernerman (2005, 5) has argued, while "multiculturalism (as an embrace of diversity) and nationalism (as a quest for unity and identity) are often depicted as contradictory ideas", this is not always the case in Canada. For Canadians, as we will show below, the "embrace of diversity" evinced by multiculturalism (at least in its ideal form) is precisely what gives citizens a sense of "unity and identity" as well as a sense of belonging. There is, in other words, a taken-for-granted quality about Canadian multiculturalism-as-nationalism, or 'banal nationalism.' Billig (1995, 6) defines banal nationalism as those elements of our day-to-day life that are so entrenched as to escape notice, so "everyday" as to not warrant special recognition. He writes that "the ideological habits, by which our nations are reproduced as nations, are unnamed and there unnoticed." Such habits may be quotidian and routine, but they are not unimportant.

This approach to multiculturalism in Canada adds a new dimension to ongoing debates about how the policy and culture of pluralism functions in Canada for individuals. The literature on multiculturalism in Canada is vast and multifaceted (Adams 2007; Banting and Kymlicka 2010). There are important studies, for instance, discussing notions of "interactive multiculturalism" (Hartmann and Gerteis 2005), which attempts to articulate how and whether Canada deals with

issues of diversity and pluralism in unique, and perhaps successful, ways (Griffith 2013; Winter 2011). Equally sophisticated work exists on how racism and unequal power dynamics still animate much of Canadian life for visible minorities (Koning and Banting 2013; Reitz and Bannerjee 2009), particularly when it is often unclear where one lands on the "model or not model" minority continuum (Kramer 2003; Ku 2011). And more recently, there have been vibrant debates about reasonable accommodation and the discrimination faced by religious groups, particularly Canadian Muslims (Ramachandran 2009; Saunders 2012). Indeed, Kymlicka (2005, 10) has stated that "public support for multiculturalism has declined as Muslims have come to be seen as the main proponents or beneficiaries of the policy." Such debates are of course very closely tied to the portrayal of visible cultural and religious minorities in the mainstream media (Haque 2010; Helly 2012), as well as discourses that are seen to specifically target a particular community (see, for example, the National Council of Canadian Muslims and their response to the Canadian Senate report on National Security: Elghawaby 2015).

Some studies are more optimistic about their findings in relation to multiculturalism in Canada. Nagra and Peng (2013) argue, much like we do below, that being Muslim and Canadian is not mutually exclusive. Indeed, feelings of pride and belonging about "being Canadian" are not automatically nullified by experiences of racism or discrimination. Instead, quite intriguingly, many experiences of Tamil youth in our study were articulated as not really reflective of Canadian values as a whole. In other words, they felt that the broader culture of Canada would stand by them in the face of racism and xenophobia, that this culture was not tainted or damaged by individuals who are violating its core tenets of pluralism and respect for diversity. Banal nationalism provides a particularly useful framework for understanding such views because it helps to articulate the way in which multiculturalism functions as a kind of taken-for-granted ingredient of Canadian identity.

The next section outlines briefly the antecedents to displacement from Sri Lanka that led to the creation of the world's largest single Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in the world. This is followed by a note on the methods that inform this paper. The final section analyzes findings from the research that relate to the lived realities of multiculturalism that allow us to make the argument that it is an expression of banal nationalism that may be flawed in a number of ways, but serves to produce social cohesion for this racialized group of newcomers in Canada.

DISPLACEMENT FROM SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka is a small island off the southern coast of India, approximately twenty-five thousand square miles (65,000 square kilometres) in size, or twice the size of

Vancouver Island. While its close proximity to India has meant that religious, cultural, and social influences from India have always been present in the country, the Palk Strait that separates Sri Lanka and India has buffered the island-nation from shifts in the Indian political climate (De Silva 1997, 9). Sri Lanka's significant ethnic and religious diversity lies at the center of its social and political history. Of more than 20 million people in Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese comprise the majority ethnic group, with 74 percent of the population, who mostly identify as Buddhists. The Tamil community in Sri Lanka is made up of Sri Lankan Tamils (12.6 percent) and Indian Tamils (5.6 percent), most of whom are Hindu, but with a significant number of Christians (mostly Catholic). The Muslims of Sri Lanka make up about seven percent of the population (De Silva 1997, 3-5; McGilvray 2008). The population also consists of smaller ethnic groups including the Burghers (0.4 percent), who are descendants of European settlers, and the Veddas, the indigenous peoples of Sri Lanka.

Ethnic tensions between Tamils and Sinhalese, which became an intimate part of Sri Lankan society throughout the twentieth century, were initially about language and access to government services (Tambiah 1986, 74; Wilson 1988). These tensions eventually spilled over into full-scale violence in the 1970s, increasingly coloured by Tamil demands for autonomy and territorial rights. While the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), or Tamil Tigers for short, became the dominant militant rebel group, numerous other militant groups were active in the 1970s and 1980s. Over time, most of their leaders were either killed by the LTTE or crossed over to the government's side (Hellman-Rajanayagam 1994).

In July 1983 the LTTE launched a deadly attack on Sri Lankan troops located on the Jaffna Peninsula, killing an officer and a dozen soldiers. In retaliation, the political leadership of the country encouraged and allowed fatal pogroms against Tamils to take place in the capital, Colombo, and beyond, resulting in Black July (Harrison 2003). Despite peace talks in 1985 and a Ceasefire Agreement in 2002, civil war continued until May 2009, when the Sri Lankan armed forces defeated the Tigers in Mullivaikkal, a tiny spit of land in northeastern Sri Lanka. Civilian casualties were high, with the United Nations estimating that anywhere between 40,000-70,000 civilians lost their lives (Harrison 2013; UN Panel of Experts Report 2011; Weiss 2011). Meanwhile, in the Greater Toronto area a large number of Tamils who were part of the diaspora took to the streets. Demonstrations were organized calling for international attention and a ceasefire in Sri Lanka, culminating in the blockade of the Gardiner Expressway, a major thoroughfare in the city, by about five thousand people, including some women pushing strollers (Amarasingam 2015; Nallainathan 2009).

The vast majority of members in the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in Canada, now estimated at over 200,000, arrived after the beginning of the war in 1983 (Wayland 2004). For a group that faced discrimination in its home country, and arrived in

Canada with many coming as asylum seekers, it is not surprising that the notion of multiculturalism would be attractive to these newcomers. Official respect, rights, and even legal entitlements for ethnonational groups that are different from the majority of native-born Canadians are novel and progressive, at least on paper. As we will show, many Tamils in Canada have linked multiculturalism so closely with their identities in Canada that it is quite often one of the only things they can really articulate clearly about what it means to be Canadian. Our study focuses on exploring the question of how multiculturalism operates in the everyday lives of Canadians, and how the notion of multiculturalism, despite all of the criticisms they may have, still animates how they think of Canada and who they are as Canadians.

METHODS

To understand the role of multiculturalism in the everyday lives of Tamil Canadians, two qualitative methods were employed: focus groups convened in 2012 and semi-structured interviews held in 2013. The interviews were then transcribed and coded using software described below. Focus groups were composed of 5-6 individuals and consisted of adult youth who were members of Tamil Student Associations (TSAs) at universities, and members of Tamil diaspora organizations with more diverse age profiles. Fifty-two in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with first-, 1.5- and second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil Canadians in and around Toronto. The sampling strategy employed was purposive in that we sought to recruit similar numbers of men and women, and approximately half who were immigrants from Sri Lanka (first generation) and half who were the children of immigrants who were born in Canada (second generation) or came to Canada before the age of 13 (1.5 generation). Advertisements were placed in Tamil community online newspapers, health outreach listservs that focused on Sri Lankan clientele, and on social media sites, such as those of Tamil Student Associations from all of the universities in Ontario. Some snowball sampling was used when research participants referred individuals from their social networks to participate in the study where we needed additional representation.

An interview guide was developed based on findings from the pilot phase of the study which included focus groups of Tamil-Canadian youth in the Greater Toronto Area. Interviews were conducted with 24 first-generation, 8 second-generation and twenty 1.5-generation participants, mostly in Greater Toronto, but also in the Southern Ontario cities of London, Windsor, and Waterloo. First-generation Tamil-Canadians are defined as individuals who emigrated from Sri Lanka as adults. The mean age of this group was 49 years, with an average age of arrival of 30 years. This group was well-educated with all participants reporting that they had completed at least a high school diploma; 79% of this group had obtained a university degree or

higher (highest level of education obtained: 29% graduate degree, 50% university degree, 16% some post-secondary education, and 4% high school diploma). Second-generation Tamil-Canadians are those who were born in Canada. This group had a mean age of 23 years and were also a well-educated group (highest level of education obtained: 12.5% graduate degree, 50% university degree, and 25% some post-secondary education). Finally, 1.5-generation Tamil-Canadians, defined as those who immigrated before their 13th birthday (Kelly 2014), came from Sri Lanka as young children. They were 28 years old, on average, at the time of the interviews. The average age of their arrival in Canada was 6 years. This group was also well educated, with 75% of the group holding a university degree or graduate degree. While all interviews were conducted in English, both interviewers understand and speak Tamil, so respondents were encouraged to reply in whichever language they were most comfortable. Newspaper calls for participants, however, were made only in English, potentially limiting the pool of respondents.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and verified. Transcripts were then coded and analyzed using NVIVO10, using a 'grounded theory' approach (Charmaz 2014). This allowed the research team to analyze research participants' narratives in a systematic, flexible, and inductive manner (Charmaz 2014; Green and Thorogood 2009, 14). Initial open coding generated both in-vivo codes and codes based on well-established concepts in the literature on multiculturalism (Grillo 2007; May 2002). All themes were identified, categorized, and reviewed over multiple team meetings to improve reliability of the analysis and interpretation of the data (Green and Thorogood 2009, 221). More than one hundred codes emerged from the transcripts, and these were organized under broader themes and subthemes in an iterative process. The most pertinent narratives related to multiculturalism are excerpted and discussed in the next section.

Multiculturalism as Banal Nationalism: Sri Lankan Tamils in Canada

Canada's multiculturalism was enshrined in policy in 1988 and "served as recognition of how Canada, in one century, had become a multi-ethnic and multicultural society, one in which those of backgrounds other than English or French made up nearly one-third of the total population" (Francis et al. 2000, 499). Although some politicians and journalists at the time pointed out that such multicultural initiatives were geared towards winning ethnic votes (Plamondon 2013), the rhetoric was soon backed up with concrete efforts. By the mid to late 1980s, the Canadian government "was investing modestly in multiculturalism, funding ethnic day-care centres, heritage-language classes, cultural festivals, and conferences and providing grants for the preparation of histories of the major Canadian ethnic groups" (Francis et al. 2000, 514).

Although multiculturalism is not a uniform policy, it does have some core tenets: "an emphasis on bringing Canadians of diverse backgrounds together; fostering a culture of inclusion; and a commitment to core values of equality, accommodation, and acceptance" (Biles and Ibrahim 2005, 155). Fleras and Elliot (2002) point out the difficulties in defining multiculturalism. It has become a buzzword with many meanings used differently in distinct contexts. It is "a victim of its own success. Multiculturalism, which is so central to modern Canadian discourse, has come to mean so many things that consensus about what it is may no longer be possible" (Fleras and Elliot 2002, 16). As Bhiku Parekh also states, "[m]ulticulturalism doesn't simply mean numerical plurality of different cultures, but rather a community which is creating, guaranteeing, encouraging spaces within which different communities are able to grow at their own pace" (quoted in Fleras and Elliot 2002, 34).

In what follows we analyze Tamil Canadians' narratives of Canadian multiculturalism as policy and daily life, identifying three major themes: 1) the idea that Tamils feel 'othered' in Sri Lanka but accepted in Canada; 2) that this acceptance is related to the notion of Canada as a "nation of immigrants;" and, 3) that many respondents were critical of multiculturalism. While multiculturalism is criticized in many of these narratives, the critique reveals much about the way in which it plays out in people's daily lives.

Rejected in Sri Lanka, Accepted in Canada

While we lack the space to fully examine the 26 years of civil war in Sri Lanka here, it forms the backdrop of our research and hence the study traces a particular expression of multiculturalism in Canada. The sense that Sri Lankan Tamils were and are second-class citizens was repeated often, particularly among first-generation participants. Their overarching appreciation of multiculturalism and their feeling of inclusion in Canada appear to be generated in part by their experiences of exclusion in Sri Lanka. Many of these participants came of age during the implementation of a series of policies that marginalized Tamils from the 1950s to the 1970s, from the *Sinhala Only Act* to discrimination faced in university admissions (DeVotta 2004). Many of them also experienced riots and pogroms which were a common feature of Sri Lankan society leading up to the full-scale outbreak of the war in 1983. One respondent, a 48-year-old Tamil man from Colombo who arrived in Toronto at the age of 24, stated that he financially supported the Tamil Tigers while in Canada, and would have likely joined them if he remained in Sri Lanka. When asked about his support for a separate state, however, he responded that it was not "a feasible idea" as Tamil Eelam would struggle economically and socially. He suggested instead that the Canadian model of decentralized federalism, with a division of powers between central government and various regional governments, could work quite well in Sri

Lanka. Even while he reflected on political solutions that could be tried in Sri Lanka, he was clear that return was not an option for him. "Canada is the place where I feel I most belong," he said, "If I go back to Sri Lanka, I would probably face the same thing because I would be going back to a country that doesn't accept me as a Tamil" (Interview 103).[1]

Sri Lanka becomes a constitutive outside (Mouffe 1992) against which Tamils in Canada define themselves. Many expressed a sense of inclusion in Canada that is attributed to experiences of marginalization in Sri Lanka. A 75-year-old Tamil man who arrived in Canada at the age of 45 emphasized the idea of Canada as a 'nation of immigrants', a theme we revisit below (Interview 105). This respondent had migrated from Sri Lanka at the age of 25 in 1962, going to the United Kingdom to study, and remaining there for twenty years before arriving in Canada. He noted repeatedly that he had "no interest in Sri Lanka," that it was a "run-down country", and with the post-war militarization of the Tamil-dominated Northern and Eastern provinces, he has lost all interest in ever returning. When asked about his Canadian identity, he too pointed to multiculturalism, equal rights, and inclusion. "In Sri Lanka, you're not respected as a Tamil," he noted, "you feel that you are one below, you know? In Canada, you feel like you can give your life for this country because you are 100 percent like anybody else. In Sri Lanka, you are not 100 percent like the rest of the majority." For this respondent, life in the UK also emerged as an important point of comparison to Canada, having spent considerable time there. "The UK is not an immigrant country," he argued, "so you are never a part of the country. You're always an immigrant. In Canada, everyone is an immigrant. So, Canada can be your home."

First-generation immigrants more often linked their Canadian and multicultural identities to events and experiences in Sri Lanka, but such references were not altogether absent from 1.5- or second-generation narratives. For younger participants, their experiences of Sri Lanka were, by definition, less direct and more influenced by their families, diaspora activism, and/or growing up *in* Canada (where many noted racism and discrimination) than about experiences of marginalization in Sri Lanka. One 22-year-old Tamil woman, who was born in Toronto, recalled visiting Sri Lanka with her parents in the late 1990s and feeling very alarmed about the situation there (Interview 215). As she explained, "I didn't understand, but I remember walking down the street and my mom was like, 'Don't speak English. Don't speak Tamil. Don't speak any of the languages you know. Just keep your eyes down'. And the streets were like lined with soldiers, and I don't know. I didn't really feel safe." While she recounted experiences of xenophobia and racism related to her religious identity and her activism in Canada around developments in Sri Lanka, she nevertheless argued that Canada was home:

A lot of people don't understand Hinduism…and so I felt like kids made fun of me [in Canada]. They would say, 'oh, you worship an elephant'. Or something like that. Like kids very openly made fun of me. Especially when the conflict in Sri Lanka was, you know, escalating. People would make fun of me, they were like, 'Terrorist. Your family are probably terrorists'. Things like that.

Interviewer: So, you know, having gone through this experience with feeling very othered in the communities here, do you feel at home in Canada?

Ya, I have family here. I have friends here. I have people who care about me here. I know it's like, you know culturally, historically if I don't fit in here, I'm not going to feel loved in Sri Lanka. I feel loved here, and that's nice. And I feel like, especially in a place like Toronto, it's easy to build relationships, because people don't really see the colour of your skin. They do, but that's not like what makes you friends, or makes you fall in love with someone. It's your personality.

Whether respondents experienced discrimination in Sri Lanka while growing up there or felt unsafe during family visits during the war, most respondents expressed an overall sense of inclusion and security while in Canada.

Respondents were not blindly idealistic about these issues, however. To be sure, many in the Tamil community have felt that they have been scrutinized by law enforcement because of their commitment to the plight of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka, because some of them have supported and funded the LTTE, and because thousands of people from their community took to the streets during the final months of the war in 2009. They did not, however, return to Sri Lanka to fight with the LTTE. Like the previous respondent, many Tamils have faced discrimination and suspicion in Canada, but they also insist that they "feel loved here." This is precisely the argument we are putting forth in this paper, that multiculturalism functions in Canada as a banal, taken-for-granted nationalism that is relatively peaceful, one that goes beyond mere support or criticism.

Being Canadian, Being Multicultural: The Contours of Banal Nationalism

The way Canadians of Sri Lankan Tamil backgrounds discuss multiculturalism reveals much about how it functions in their lives and the importance they ascribe to it. In this section, we examine this process in more detail by examining three themes that were prevalent amongst our respondents: multiculturalism as facilitating the maintenance of one's culture; multiculturalism as respecting one's neighbours; and multiculturalism and its relationship to Canadian identity. One 41-year-old man arrived in Canada from Jaffna at the age of 12 and began by first recounting his experiences during the Black July 1983 riots. In school when the riots started, he initially had little idea of what was going on. The teachers had told them to stay calm, but soon his father arrived to take him home (Interview 214). As he recalls:

> And I remember my dad coming from work, grabbing me and then we went to our house. But we didn't want to stay at our house because there was a chance that some mob might come and burn it or destroy it like they were doing with other Tamil properties. So we jumped the fence and we ran over to our Sinhalese neighbour. And we stayed with them for a few days.

His experiences in Colombo, the capital city, are significant because 'Colombo Tamils,' as they are sometimes pejoratively called by "Jaffna Tamils," have historically experienced their ethnic identity differently and interacted with the state in distinct ways. As this respondent notes plainly, "I've always been Sri Lankan first. That's just my mindset. And that could be because I'm from Colombo where people don't say I'm Sinhalese or I'm Tamil." The role of large cities in this study (Colombo and Toronto) appears important in providing a 'large tent' for difference, whether ethnonational identities or multiple class fractions.

This man's views on the Sri Lankan conflict have also influenced the choice of diaspora organizations for which he volunteers, which are far less separatist and supportive of the LTTE or any kind of ethno-religious nationalism than other organizations in the Greater Toronto Area. Rather, these organizations tend to be more oriented towards a multicultural ethos. When asked about his views on multiculturalism in Canada, he noted that it was simply "the fact that many people of all sorts, from all over the world can come to one country, one town, just live together, and still be able to maintain their culture if they so choose." When asked whether being Canadian conflicted in any way with his Tamil or Sri Lankan identity, he noted that there "isn't any sort of strong sense of Canadian culture" and that it was "just a host of multiple cultures."

Indeed, the notion that Canadian identity is nothing more than a plurality of identities has often been criticized by scholars who point to such sentiments as evidence of the indifferent attitude that Canadians have towards multiculturalism. In contrast, we argue that the existence of plural cultures combined with a "loose" definition of Canadian identity is precisely what makes multiculturalism work: it is inclusive and open to interpretation. A 32-year old male participant who was born in England and came to Canada at the age of 11 months, for example, described the weak national identity of Canada as a strength (Interview 232):

> There's a reason why people think we have a weak national identity, Canadians and people outside alike. It's because we're not married to political positions and strategies as a country the way a lot of other countries are. So it makes us look weak, but at the same time it's amazing. Somebody can be 40, Indian, having lived in Dubai their whole life, come here and can be Canadian. Not just for themselves, but the criteria is so poor for what it is to be Canadian, that another Canadian can't confidently judge them as not being Canadian. And that is amazing! When you consider all this talk about institutions

and stuff, membership creates exclusion. When you consider how much pain there is in that kind of exclusion and Tamils are a product of that. The riots and the war are such an extreme example of that. When you come to a place like this which really sucks in terms of knowing where it is as a country and stuff, the product is beautiful. You come here and be anybody. And you can continue to be you.

By not being "married to political positions", the exclusionary construct of the 'nation' is pried open and rendered banal in an additional sense.

For many of our respondents, Canadian nationalism was characterized by the lack of an overarching and domineering identity that may erode an individual's culture and religious identity. This in turn, makes them proud to be Canadian. Being Canadian, then, means that you can "continue to be you." As another respondent, a 36-year-old first generation woman who arrived in Canada at the age of 19, argued: in Canada "I've seen this very good multiculturalism because I've never been ashamed to wear my traditional clothes, or my pottu [ritualistic forehead markings]. Anything goes. Nobody's going to look at you like, 'Oh! Where's she coming from?' because everybody has their own culture" (Interview 117). Similarly, another 28-year-old woman, who arrived in Canada at the age of 8, conflated her Canadian identity with multiculturalism. When asked what it means to be Canadian, she was initially flustered: "I've never thought of it like that," she continued (Interview 229):

What does it mean to be Canadian? Honestly, I'm thinking of it from a multicultural lens. Being Canadian means being open to other people's culture, other people's identity, being respectful of other cultures. Because when I think Canada, I think of a place where everybody's here from different cultures. So you know, you practice whatever it is, but you also respect one another. So being Canadian is being respectful towards one another's culture, religion, beliefs, and things like that.

Understandings of multiculturalism and Canadian identity as intimately related, and as something about which Canadians should express pride, were prevalent among both first- and second-generation participants. The logic is admittedly tautological in some ways: Canadian multiculturalism encourages individuals to maintain and practice their own culture while respecting and engaging others. This, in turn, allowed our research participants to appreciate Canada's peculiar approach to articulating its own national identity.

Basu (2011) shows how multiculturalism is not just about how newcomers and different ethnonational groups relate to the 'mainstream', but how it encourages such groups to connect with other cultural norms, and learn each other's mother tongue through government-sponsored heritage language classes, a phenomenon she calls 'multifarious multiculturalism.'

"Not as Advertised": Multiculturalism as a Segregating Force

In addition to the many positive views expressed about multiculturalism, some assessments were more critical. Our argument, however, is not about whether Canadians see multiculturalism through a utopian lens or not. Rather, we contend that debate and criticism reveal as much about how Canadians relate multiculturalism to their national identity, as more positive analyses. Much like an American who may stand up when the American national anthem plays but may still critique his or her country's foreign policy and standing in the world, debate and disagreement about multiculturalism among Canadians with Sri Lankan Tamil roots reveals a great deal about what they think it means to be Canadian and their sense of belonging in the country.

Despite many positive views of multiculturalism, several participants were also critical of the concept. A 63-year-old first-generation respondent and father of two adult daughters mentioned that as his daughters grew older and began to carve out their own identities, they were increasingly drawn to their roots and their own ethnic group (Interview 102). He noted that they did not often intermingle with peers of different backgrounds. The participant himself felt strongly about the importance of living among the Tamil community in Toronto, and that his preference for proximity to the community influenced his choice of residing in Markham, Ontario [a city adjacent to Toronto]. And yet he was critical that his adult children chose to self-segregate into ethnic clusters. Notably, he points to discrimination from the broader community as the force that directs people into their own distinct ethnonational groups:

> Before when they were in small schools most of their friends were white. Like unspoiled, small, smaller. So they were not contaminated with racial things and all that. Right? But high school, she said, my elder daughter said, "Appa, whites with whites, blacks with blacks, browns with browns, Chinese with Chinese." That segregation starts right there at the high school. Right? Especially in a multicultural GTA, right? Maybe outside it would be a different story. But the seeking identity starts in high school. And then they feel the discrimination. And then that pushes them to come together.

In contrast, a 25-year-old second-generation participant described multiculturalism as a basis for forming racialized cliques precisely *because* of the weak national identity it affords (Interview 207). In the absence of a strong sense of what Canadian national identity and citizenship mean, people consolidate their social relations along ethnonational lines. Canada's weak national identity is discussed above as an inclusive force, but Canadian multiculturalism is also perceived as a segregating force:

> It has become cliques. I don't know what the intention was, but right now what I see is just groups, Tamils are together, Indians are together, Chinese are together, Italians are together. There is, in certain aspects, there is a little bit of overlap, but we still very much distinctly identify ourselves with one group, rather than Canadian. I think the problem why we can't is because we don't know what Canadian means. Because I feel like people in America, especially when my friends go to America, they feel very American. Maybe because they don't have the Tamil things or they didn't have the Chinese things, they're forced into an American identity. I don't know. But I feel like, especially Australians, like my friends in Australia, they feel more Australian. They feel more Australian than I feel Canadian. I think part of it is that we don't know what Canadian means. It's just, what is Canadian? I don't know the answer to that. Is it just Mounties and beavers? No, it's beyond that [laughs].

In contrast to stronger and more salient national identities in other ethnically heterogeneous, settler/immigrant societies like the U.S. and Australia, this respondent sees Canadian identity as having a negative impact on newcomers who have no clear sense of 'nation' to adopt. The cliques mentioned above were seen as vehicles of exclusion and segregation.

Recognizing this segregation, many participants also emphasized the need for integration into Canadian society and the need to limit the expression of individual cultures. The expression of one's cultural or ethnic identity was acceptable, insofar as it is done quietly and does not interfere with the lives of fellow Canadians. In analyzing these narratives, the critiques levelled against multiculturalism are less important than the ways in which multiculturalism as a national identity structures these critiques and takes multiculturalism as an accepted if imperfect framework in Canada; multiculturalism colours many daily interactions in myriad ways, both positive and negative.

Among first-generation Tamils, the role of multiculturalism in their lives was vivid. More importantly, they had a clear idea of their "responsibilities" in such a context. These observations became quite evident in a surprising interview with a 52-year-old first-generation male participant:

> That means, we keep the culture to some extent and co-exist…I strongly believe that we also should respect other cultural people, other cultures and also I strongly believe that we should not show off ourselves as a particular distinct community. Like you and I wore something that anybody else wore…I shouldn't have come here with a national dress or something. That's not the right idea. Like the lady next to us is wearing the headscarf and stuff. Those are the things I don't like. I believe that that's something we have to avoid. We don't want to show off too much of our culture to the rest of the community. We have to celebrate it quietly…. So it's a sort of a compromise (Interview 104).

Multiculturalism is perhaps a Canadian compromise? This man's comments inadvertently recognize the openness of Canadian "culture", but also signal a yearning for

a more robust and unifying public national identity. He offers a starker public and private divide between spaces of one's specific cultural practice and of one's engagement with Canadian society. This quiet expression of culture was also discussed by other participants. In particular, a 24-year-old woman who came to Canada as a child further criticized multiculturalism for the temporary sense of belonging or membership that it provides (Interview 213). She suggests that once you express any rights or freedoms that agitate "mainstream" society, you are seen as 'other' and stripped of your Canadian identity:

> And especially like reading those articles about the protests. You can tell what they think of these people, they're questioning the fact that they're Canadian because they decided to protest. The fact that they're exercising their rights to protest doesn't make them Canadian anymore. I feel like, you know, people tend to pick and choose when you can be Canadian or not. Ya, I think multiculturalism probably is not as it is advertised.

This temporary and selective inclusion of minorities into the broader national identity is not a new idea. Belonging to Canada as a racialized immigrant group is tied to good behaviour and/or achieving "model minority" status. In this sense, multiculturalism also serves as a kind of self-imposed surveillance, a way of producing good behaviour among newcomers, especially racialized groups. Alison Mountz (2010), in reference to Salvadoreans living in the U.S. with temporary status and who aspire to become permanent residents, calls this performance of good behaviour which is self-imposed and self-policed "transnational panopticism." People behave well, as though they are being monitored, as though they are prospective citizens. A 24-year-old second-generation female participant criticized multiculturalism as being a policy that often hides the underlying racism present in Canadian society.

> The way that [multiculturalism's] presented, and the way that it's kind of touted in Canada is as being this amazing, fantastic thing is problematic to me, because it's not the, like the really scary racist aspects of it aren't questioned. It's "Yay! It's great. You can be who you want to be." But then at the same time it's like why is there this divide? Why is it not being questioned?... I would say that just because people are allowed to be, to organize themselves along specific, like racial or ethnic, affiliations doesn't mean that there isn't like racism between. Right?… it's not questioned that racism still exists. Like the fact that we're not homogenous does not get us off the hook (Interview 203).

Multiculturalism has been accused of 'whitewashing' racism and racialized processes of exclusion (Thobani 2007); this respondent names this critique.

A 64-year-old first-generation woman who participated in our study pointed out the implications of failing to critically examine racism in multicultural Canada. She directly criticizes multiculturalism as a superficial policy that ignores racism. As a community support worker within the Tamil community, she noted that despite

growing ethnic diversity in Canada, political power is still concentrated among the dominant ethnic group:

> Even now the ethnic community is over 50%, 53 or 54% in Toronto. But when you look at the power, who has the power? It's the dominant group who was really holding the power…. It's a struggle being an ethnic person to make, to get the system to recognize you. It's a big challenge. You sometimes get frustrated. Right now I am with the [non-profit Tamil organization]. Frustrated. You don't get funding, and we do more work than the mainstream organizations, but we are not getting funding with missions, nothing. You go to the mainstream offices and sometimes you feel, you know, what do they do. Are they working? Just check government offices, and then they get their pay, they get their benefits, they get everything. Right? But the top cream is usually the white people. The other people are darker (Interview 115).

The white settler society is still intact in Canada, and this respondent clearly states this based on her experience. And yet multiculturalism would be unlikely to receive such serious consideration by newcomers to Canada if it were merely a policy veneer or façade on the part of government. Rather, as we have articulated in this analysis, multiculturalism has direct and meaningful influence on the lives of newcomers in Canada.

CONCLUSION

We have argued that scholars need to take into account more seriously how individuals who came to Canada as immigrants and those who are the children of immigrants in the country are *living* multiculturalism: how they talk about it; what it means to them; and how it serves as a kind of banal national identity. We are certainly not suggesting that Canada is a site of unproblematic racialized utopia, where racism and discrimination are remnants of history and a multitude of ethnic groups from other countries engage one another and live harmoniously (though see Basu 2011). Multiculturalism as policy, law, and a national project is flawed, but it is also a basis for social cohesion, even a kind of nationalism. We contend that multiculturalism is a kind of banal nationalism that incorporates a taken-for-granted meaning of 'Canadian' that animates Sri Lankan Tamil newcomers' self-identity. How racialized new Canadians interact with the mainstream society they encounter and "live" multicultural policy in their daily lives creates a kind of banal nationalism.

As scholars struggle to understand what it means to be Canadian, or how multiculturalism functions in Canada, we contend that there is a paucity of research related to multiculturalism among those to whom it is meant to apply; this study aims to contribute to filling that gap. The claim that multiculturalism is a form of banal nationalism, quite distinct from the fraught and sometimes militarized com-

peting nationalisms that have characterized Canadian history, may provide a useful theoretical tool to understand how belonging and national identity is produced in the everyday for people who come to Canada as refugees and other immigrants. Criticism of multiculturalism is not outside the parameters of this framework. These criticisms, whether about increased segregation of ethnonational groups, social isolation, or the failure to address structural injustices, are significant and demonstrate the meaningful implications of multiculturalism at multiple levels. At the personal and interpersonal levels, multiculturalism, as many of our respondents noted, often sets the parameters within which cultural/ethnic identity is expressed and debated, particularly when these active or passive expressions of belonging spill into the public sphere and "interfere" in significant ways with the broader society.

Some see multiculturalism as reinforcing the dominance of the settler society by evading or effacing critical dialogue on racism in Canada. This criticism, however, is also quite important for our argument here. Because multiculturalism, however flawed, is taken as a given for most if not all of our respondents, it serves as a kind of invisible glue that also produces a dimension of Canadian national identity. While multiculturalism means many things to many people, and is flawed and criticized by many, it provides a big tent for social cohesion, at least for those we interviewed. For our respondents, being Canadian means being whoever they want to be, and being accepted and included as such. For many Sri Lankan Tamils and their children in this study, this was not their experience in Sri Lanka. Others stated that Canada, lacking a more tangible sense of patriotic identity or a unifying national character, is desirable. However, multiculturalism can segregate individuals and communities into enclaves which, according to some, undermine the aims of multiculturalism. If the identity of Tamils in Sri Lanka serves as a constitutive outside (Mouffe 1992) against which Tamils in Canada define themselves, multiculturalism in Canada provides a constitutive inside, a polyglot polity, however imperfect.

Notes

1. Generally, interview references in the 100s are first-generation Tamil Canadians, while those in the 200s are 1.5- and second-generation participants.

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