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Benevolence, Global Citizenship and Post-racial Politics

ABSTRACT

This article explores how benevolence, as a discourse informing the rhetoric of global citizenship, seems to articulate a post-racial politics. By critically analyzing the construction of James Orbinski and Stephen Lewis as models of global citizenship in documentary film as well as the Aga Khan Foundation Canada’s travelling development education exhibition, Bridges that Unite, the essay argues that global citizenship presupposes, or seems to enact, an end to race. The performance of benevolence is not bound by race, but is indebted to, and rearticulates, race thinking in a way that belies the ongoing dynamics of colonial racism.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article explore comment la bienveillance, en tant que discours qui informe la rhétorique de la citoyenneté globale, semble articuler une politique post-raciale. En analysant, d’une manière critique, la construction de James Orbinski et de Stephen Lewis comme modèle de la citoyenneté globale dans un film documentaire ainsi que l’exposition itinérante et éducative, Les Ponts de l’unité (Bridges that Unite), présentée par la Fondation Aga Khan Canada, cet article démontre que la citoyenneté globale présuppose, ou semble promulguer, la fin de la race. La performance de la bienveillance n’est pas étroitement liée à la race mais elle en tire sa raison d’être, tout en prolongeant une réflexion sur la race qui cache la dynamique actuelle du racisme colonial.

Mahmood Mamdani characterizes contemporary global politics as demarcated by two contrasting narratives of “Culture Talk”: the first constructs a pre-modern Other as not-yet-modern, while the second constructs this Other as anti-modern. Mamdani writes, “Whereas the former conception encourages relations based on philanthropy, the latter notion is productive of fear and pre-emptive police or military action” (2005: 18). While these two narratives—one of benevolence, the other of security—are continuous with and reinforce one another, Mamdani
focuses on the second narrative of Culture Talk: the threat posed by the anti-modern. As David Theo Goldberg (2009), Sherene Razack (2008) and Sunera Thobani (2007) argue, discourses of security construct difference in the terms of racialized discourse; in the context of the “war on terror,” Islam is produced as a racial sign. In contrast, discourses of global citizenship, particularly in Canada, posit an end to race. In this article, I explore how benevolence, which I believe informs and shapes the rhetoric of global citizenship in Canada, seems to articulate a post-racial politics.

North Atlantic conceptions of humanitarianism and global citizenship purport to be post-racial, but not in the sense that they seek to contend with racialized thinking or to dismantle structures of racial violence. Overt analyses of race and racism have largely been ignored within development studies (Kothari 2006; White 2002; Zack-Wiliams 1995). Similarly, contemporary theories of global citizenship typically elide race and the history of colonialism. For instance, in An Introduction to Global Citizenship, Nigel Dower (2003) seems dismissive of the dynamics of race and racism, characterizing “identity politics” as the reaction of “members of certain groups [who] may be disadvantaged in various ways (economic status, public recognition) and feel that it is because they belong to a certain group that they are disadvantaged or discriminated against” (41, emphasis added). As a transnational and post-racial ideal, global citizenship excises race from global relations in a way that naturalizes rather than challenges structures of inequality.

In this article, I critically examine two distinct pedagogical examples in order to reveal the ways in which the idea of global citizenship is constructed in Canada, and to show how benevolence provides a “structure of attitude and reference” for understandings of global social and economic inequality (Said 1993: 253). I begin by examining the construction of the figure of the global-citizen-as-humanitarian in documentary films that focalize the trauma and compassion of Stephen Lewis and James Orbinski. I argue that the status of these men as figures of global citizenship requires that they be constructed as non-racial, or as exhibiting attitudes that repudiate racial difference. Then, I offer an analysis of the Aga Khan Foundation Canada's travelling development-education exhibition, Bridges that Unite. Specifically, I analyze the exhibition’s representation of “Agents of Change” and engage with how it is informed by a discourse of benevolence that relies on the ideal of cultural pluralism. I argue that global citizenship, unlike earlier forms of European imperial benevolence—the “white man’s burden”—presupposes, or seems to enact, an end to race. Taking up Cecil Foster's contention that multicultural Canada is poised to foster a new spirit of modernity, an era in which “race does not matter,” I argue in the final section of the article that benevolence provides the signature of this new modernity (2005: 25). To be modern—to be fully human—is to have the responsibility to aid and uplift an Other, who is not (yet) modern. The performance of benevolence is not bound by
race, but is indebted to, and rearticulates, race thinking in a way that belies the ongoing dynamics of colonial racism.

The “soft form” of global citizenship, as defined by development agencies, university initiatives and proponents of the concept, posits an abstract global community bound by a shared humanity (Andreotti 2006). In Canada, to be a global citizen requires helping Others in need—through humanitarian projects, for instance. According to Vanessa Andreotti, global citizenship asserts a recognition of a shared humanity as the basis for conceiving of interconnection; relies on a universalist vision of what the good life or ideal world constitutes; assumes the autonomy and agency of the individual subject to act or to help; and enacts responsibility for, rather than to, the Other (6). In Patrick Reed’s 2008 documentary Triage: Dr. James Orbinski’s Humanitarian Dilemma, former Médicins Sans Frontières (MSF) president James Orbinski describes this responsibility while reflecting on his work with MSF in war zones in Africa:

I still have—and I always will I think—the nearly uncontainable rage about what happened in Rwanda … and Somalia … and about what is happening now in many parts of the world. To see mothers and fathers and children dying of indifference, dying of neglect, of abuse, of somebody’s political calculation. […] It fills me first of all with just profound sorrow that they have to live that and die it. And then it fills me with rage frankly, and the question then is what do you do? What do you do with that? We are responsible for our lives and for our world and if we don’t engage that responsibility no one else will, and we will live or die with the legacy of our failures. (Qtd. in Reed 2008)

Here, Orbinski articulates both a moral obligation to act in the world in terms of his own sorrow and anger, and the shame of our failures to save Others. His frame of reference positions him as outside the conflict and suffering he witnesses but still responsible for acting to stop this conflict.

In Catherine Mullins’s 2005 documentary Their Brothers’ Keepers, Stephen Lewis, the former United Nations special envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, affirms a moral obligation to ease suffering. Decrying the discrepancy between the financial cost of fighting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and what has been spent during the same period on development aid, Lewis says:

I don’t understand the nature of the moral default. I love the words “we are our brothers and sisters keepers”—I’m not a biblically inclined person—but it is absolutely true that the reason you respond to people is out of an innate compassion and decency and solidarity when human beings are under siege. (Qtd. Mullins 2005)

Lewis defines humanitarian action in terms of a relation based on philanthropy; one has a moral obligation to an Other in need because that Other is also human.
For Lewis, the billions spent on war does not explain why human beings elsewhere “are under siege,” but simply reveals how little is spent on aid. As Orbinski presents it, people die of indifference (not war) and neglect (not impoverishment). Conflict and poverty are dehistoricized; our relation to the suffering of Others is defined in terms of benevolence—our compassion and decency—rather than in terms of material interconnection.

In Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers (2006), Kwame Anthony Appiah explores the nature of the obligation of the affluent to those in the so-called “developing world.” He argues, for instance, that “most of us are in no danger of meeting [our] basic obligation” in terms of giving help or aid to Africa (170). Yet he also contends that “a genuinely cosmopolitan response begins with caring to understand why the child is dying” (168). He identifies a host of causes for suffering—from poor infrastructure and governance in African states, to international trade and subsidy programs that favour U.S. and European industries, to the burden of debt for “poor countries.” Focusing specifically on humanitarian crisis relief, such as the rehydration of children suffering from diarrhea or the dumping of free grain into African economies, Appiah warns that our desire to help may actually be “doing more harm than good”: he argues that specific forms of aid may actually cause suffering (170). I want to suggest, however, that the emphasis on the moral obligation to help or aid—to be benevolent—in fact serves to do more harm than good, in that it elides the material conditions both of suffering and of the global citizen’s capacity to help. As Damien Riggs contends, “the ability to be benevolent is always already predicated on the power to do so—it does not require the giving up of power, but rather is reliant upon an imbalance of power to instantiate the categories of giver and receiver” (2004a: 8). Benevolence normalizes the position of the global citizen as helper and constructs the relationship between caregiver and beneficiary as beginning with the act of aid.

Humanitarian intervention depends on the conception of a global community bound by a shared human dignity; but as Didier Fassin argues through the notion of a “politics of life,” the contemporary (Western) moral economy of humanitarianism reflects a “complex ontology of inequality” (2007: 519). Fassin explains that there are lives that can be risked and lives that can be sacrificed, “lives that can be narrated in the first person (those who intervene) and lives that are recounted only in the third person (the voiceless in the name of whom intervention is done)” (519). Benevolence provides a structure of attitude and reference for global citizenship, and serves to redefine a material relationship of inequality as an ethical relationship aimed at helping the Other in need. In this essay, I seek to contribute to the work of complicating “benevolence as a presumed-to-be moral category,” in order to “instead understand it as a network of power that attempts to mask histories of colonisation” (Riggs 2004b). Ruth Frankenberg has noted the historical constitution of benevolence as a set of cultural practices whose whiteness goes unmarked and unnamed; this contemporary “politics of
life,” however, continues to be informed by colonial racism, articulated in post-racial terms (1993: 1).

Global Citizenship as the Spectacle and Erasure of Whiteness

Lewis and Orbinski have come to prominence as spokespersons for the causes of development aid and humanitarianism. They are in demand as speakers, and each has been the subject of documentary films with mass distribution, primarily through television. In their writing, both Lewis and Orbinski identify causes of suffering and poverty, and Lewis in particular provides compelling critiques of the disastrous impacts of Western-mandated structural adjustment programs in Africa (Lewis 2005; Orbinski 2008). However, the documentaries in which they appear produce them as figures of global citizenship in ways that elide an analysis of the causes of the suffering they witness, not to mention an analysis of why these men are in the position to help. Triage chronicles Orbinski’s return to many of the communities in which he worked with MSF. The film presents Orbinski’s reflections on the violence he witnessed in Somalia, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and provides a commentary on his suffering as well as on the project of humanitarianism. While Lewis is not the subject of Their Brothers’ Keepers, his face and voice narrate the stories of two child-headed households in Zambia. Lewis fulfills the role of the expert, providing context and analysis. The film begins with Lewis’s claim that “we have failed to subdue the pandemic,” and concludes with his invocation that “we are our brothers’ keepers” (qtd. in Mullins 2005, emphasis added). In contrast, in the CBC documentary The Value of Life: AIDS in Africa Revisited (Jackson 2004), Lewis is the subject of an episode of The Nature of Things. I characterize Lewis and Orbinski as “figures” of global citizenship because they are publicly well-known, and are represented as physical embodiments of the ideal. These two examples reveal the ways in which global citizenship remains a primarily symbolic or metaphorical construct to be figured.

In these films, both men are constructed as noble actors who undertake the responsibility of alleviating the suffering of Others. In part, the men are figured in the tradition of the white male (colonial) saviour. Adapting S. P. Mohanty’s argument (1991) that whiteness in colonial India was either invisible or eminently spectacular, I argue that while the representation of Lewis and Orbinski as global citizens relies on a spectacle of whiteness, their particular whiteness is erased rather than simply unmarked or unnamed; they are figured as performing a post-racial benevolence. In scene after scene, Lewis and Orbinski are shown in gatherings of African people in need, or with African friends and colleagues, arrangements that figure their presence in Africa as evidence of humanitarianism’s post-racial ethic. However, the spectacle of their presence as white men—in Africa and on-screen—is crucial to the films’ messages. The men are positioned in such a way as to represent (i.e., describe) the suffering of Others elsewhere. Yet they also
represent this Other in a political sense, in that they speak for them, often quite literally. For instance, in one scene in *Triage*, Orbinski asks a Somali man about the murder of an expatriate doctor; the man’s own voice, however, is drowned out by a voiceover in which Orbinski retells the man’s response. Further, the trauma these men experience as witnesses to the suffering of Others elsewhere is foregrounded in the films. The story of the individuated subject focuses on Lewis’s and Orbinski’s suffering, figuring the benevolence of the global citizen. As a reviewer of *Triage* describes, “the documentary affords a glimpse into Orbinski’s heart, and by extension, the heart of humanitarianism: our capacity for decency” (Sibbald 2008: 1192). The documentaries do not enact a relationship between the viewer and the person suffering somewhere else, but rather one between the viewer and the figure of global citizenship.

While the films document Lewis’s and Orbinski’s good deeds, the men are also produced as benevolent, or as those who are good. *The Value of Life* begins with images of Lewis welcomed to a village by singing children. David Suzuki’s introductory narration tells how the film will trace Lewis’s journey “from hope to despair to hope again” (qtd. in Jackson 2004). In a voice-over, while he sits on the floor of a home with a child in his arms, Lewis states:

> I’d moved from frustration to anger; I’ve moved from anger to rage because I don’t understand how people can’t absorb the truth that in ten to fifteen years from now those countries will be falling apart. ‘Til my dying day I will never forgive the Western countries for all the lives that were needlessly lost.

As the film traces his visits to a variety of African countries, Lewis’s emotional distress is foregrounded in a way that dehistoricizes the suffering that affects him. As Sherene Razack argues, we talk of the pain of the “peacekeeper” in a way that forecloses recognition of the colonial violence of which the peacekeeper is a part (2004: 19). The emphasis on the stories and trauma of the figure of global citizenship reflects Fassin’s contention that within the “politics of life” there is a distinction between “the *zoe* of ‘populations’ who can only passively await the bombs and the aid workers, and the *bios* of the ‘citizens of the world,’ the humanitarians who come to render them assistance” (2007: 507). The humanitarian worker is the speaking subject and the subject who willingly risks his safety; he is more fully human. As global citizens, Lewis and Orbinski are admirable for achieving a post-racial ethic through which they regard the human dignity of the Other; but, paradoxically, it is precisely their positioning as white and male that allows their spectacular benevolence. The pained expressions on the men’s faces and the films’ close-ups on their eyes or hands make visible an emotional suffering that the figures also articulate through their stories. In contrast, those suffering from poverty and war are represented only as physical through photographs of their wounds or their bodies. The psychic aspects of
their experiences are represented by Lewis and Orbinski. The global citizen’s performance of compassion marks the repudiation of race, or its relegation to the past, but the spectacle of the feeling white man who bears witness to the suffering Other depends on cultural norms of racial and gender identity. The compassion and decency of global citizenship is marked by the undoing of the expectations of white masculinity, an undoing that only a white male can perform.

As figures of global citizenship, Orbinski and Lewis are presented in relation to other places and are surrounded by human beings in need, all of whom are very specifically coded as black. Orbinski and Lewis are often depicted either interacting with African children or recounting stories of their interactions with these children. In *The Value of Life*, for instance, Lewis describes his desire to reconnect with a young girl he had met in Rwanda in 2001, who, he recounts over footage of the original visit, “attached herself physically to me.” He describes how there was a look of abandonment in her eyes when he left, and how her “sweet little face [was] etched in [his] mind.” His “reunion” with her in 2003 depicts the two embracing as Lewis narrates, saying “we are attached to each other.” He explains that “the mother” is dying of AIDS and that she and her daughter are depressed and anxious. Lewis re-presents them in the sense that he makes meaning of their bodies, and he represents them in a political sense, because the child and her mother do not speak. The image of Lewis physically embracing the child figures their relationship—which consists of two brief meetings two years apart—as a mutual and meaningful emotional bond, which covers over the power relations inherent in the historically repeated image of the white male humanitarian and the redeemable black child.

Scenes like this, which recur so often within development marketing more generally, reflect the paradoxical positioning of whiteness in discourses of benevolence, where the object/Other is always racialized as not-white, and is usually a child. Richard Dyer describes how “whites must be seen to be white, yet whiteness as race resides in invisible properties and whiteness as power is maintained by being unseen” (1997: 45). In the examples of these figures of global citizenship, benevolence needs to be seen as white at the same time that whiteness, or race, appears to be repudiated. As feeling, benevolent people, Lewis and Orbinski have the authority to speak of and for the suffering of Others; this is reinforced by being (un)seen, and marked against the images of African children, and African friends and colleagues who are figured as peers, rather than bodies in need. In *The Value of Life*, Graça Machel, the African politician, human rights activist, and wife of Nelson Mandela, is presented as Lewis’s colleague, standing beside him in a couple of scenes. The narrator explains how Lewis “enlisted” this high-profile African woman in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Similarly, in *Triage*, Orbinski is reunited with a Somali colleague named Lesto, who, the viewer is told, saved Orbinski’s life on numerous occasions. However, it is Orbinski’s story of paying to save Lesto from certain death that Orbinski narrates in the film. Unlike
the colonist saviour of the white man's burden, the figure of the global citizen is authenticated by the assertion of emotional bonds to Africans. Such examples reveal the ambivalence of race within the structure of attitude and reference of benevolence.

Indeed, in some ways, Lewis and Orbinski's ability to speak of and for those suffering might seem to reflect the way in which they undo race or subvert their whiteness. In one scene in *Triage*, Orbinski visits the King Faisal Hospital in Kigali, where MSF was stationed during the Rwandan genocide. The film shows Orbinski entering a room to meet a group of his Rwandan colleagues from 1994. Rather than documenting this reunion, the film cuts from the meeting to present an extended scene of Orbinski providing a tour to the current director-general of the hospital, John Stevens, who is also white. Over images in which Orbinski describes to Stevens what he witnessed in the hospital during the genocide, an Orbinski voice-over explains that the director was unaware of what had happened and that his ignorance of the genocide as “the defining moment of that country” is a “huge tragedy.” Orbinski reflects on the importance of cultural memory and speaks with the authority of “a native.” As the tour guide, Orbinski is the object of the gaze for both the viewer and for Stevens, and it is his experience of witnessing the genocide that is narrated in place of the experiences of his Rwandan colleagues. In this scene, Stevens's apparent ignorance of the place seems marked by his whiteness and foreignness. As a figure of the global citizen, Orbinski is situated against whiteness or as not-white. His implicit castigating of Stevens is a spectacular performance of a post-racial identity.

There is one moment in the film, however, where race, or “culture,” is overtly referenced, and it troubles the ideal of a common humanity that Orbinski otherwise seems to be presented as figuring. Reflecting on the personal trauma that he experienced as a witness to the horrors of the Rwandan genocide, Orbinski states:

> My experience of coming back from Rwanda ... it was an experience of despair. How do you get out of this? This is what we are. I am this. I am capable of this. My culture is capable. We did it. You know? As this was happening, as genocide was happening here in Rwanda, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, rape, genocide was happening simultaneously in the former Yugoslavia. At the very same time. That's our culture. That's where we come from. You know? We are capable of that. (Qtd. in Reed 2008)

When Orbinski first utters the pronoun “we” in this passage, he seems to be acknowledging that he was a part of the genocide, and not outside of it as a foreign bystander or a witness. But after introducing the simultaneity and similarity of the war in Yugoslavia, he remarks that “that's our culture” and that “we are capable of that,” statements that seem to represent a white and European “we” rather than a post-racial human “we.” This monologue is accompanied by two photographs
depicting the war in the former Yugoslavia: one of elderly women sitting by a fence, and the other of the bare backs of emaciated men illuminated by the sun. These images contrast starkly with the film’s graphic imagery of mutilation and suffering from the Rwandan genocide. This contrast reflects an example of “the politics of life” Fassin identifies: the black body can be rendered bare or abject in a way that the white body cannot (2007).

Orbinski’s reflections on “our”/white capability to also commit genocide or the idea that Lewis is “haunted by a world that looks the other way,” suggest the possibility of critical self-reflection, but implicitly mark a group of people who must bear responsibility for Others. As I have argued, while the rhetoric of global citizenship that informs these films presents these men as figures of benevolence in a way that seems to articulate a post- or non-racial cultural politics, such post-racialism serves to elide historical, structural and racially experienced forms of domination and inequality. At the same time that global citizenship relies on the authority of the white male voice, this voice is paradoxically de-raced through the spectacle of the benevolent figure’s positioning in Africa. In the next section, I extend this analysis of the post-racial politics of benevolence to interrogate how global citizenship affirms the status of full humanity as benevolence. In other words, humanity—or the modern—is marked by the responsibility to help Others.

Bridges that Unite, Pluralism and Benevolence

The travelling development-education exhibition Bridges that Unite was presented by the Aga Khan Foundation Canada (AKFC) from 2008 to 2010 in seven cities—including Halifax, where I viewed it in the autumn of 2009. The AKFC is part of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), “a family of private, non-denominational development agencies” that work in the areas of education, health care, microfinance, private sector enterprise and the restoration of cultural sites, in order to “improv[e] living conditions and opportunities for the poor, without regard to faith, origin or gender” (Bridges 2009). Bridges that Unite educates viewers on the work the AKDN has done in collaboration with the government of Canada over the past twenty-five years. More importantly, it seeks to challenge “simplistic ideas of what development looks like” by depicting the successes of community-based and cooperative development projects (Shariff 2008). The exhibition and its supplementary materials (Web site, teaching resources, etc.) repeatedly invoke the idea of Canada’s leadership role in development, but the figure of the development worker is largely absent from the exhibition apart from a section highlighting “Agents of Change,” which I will focus on below. The Bridges that Unite exhibition relies on what Elise Chouliaraki describes as “positive image appeals” (Chouliaraki 2010: 112). This strategy is unlike the ways in which development agencies have traditionally relied on a “moral emphasis of pity” or, more recently, on brand-based relations of consumer affiliation with
development agencies. The exhibition focuses on the work of local individuals and community groups. These people are named and presented as agents who shape their own futures, an exhibition strategy through which the foreign Other is presented to the Canadian viewer of the exhibition as having capabilities and not simply need.

However, the exhibition by no means provides a radical reinterpretation of the problem of global poverty. Rather, by asserting that the AKDN provides “a hand up instead of a handout,” the exhibition reflects the slow shift from charity towards the idea(s) of exchange and partnership in North Atlantic-based development agency rhetoric (Classroom 2009: 1). The development project nonetheless focuses on the problem of “poverty” rather than structural inequality. Development is presented as remedying the Other’s lack, which is defined against a normative notion of Canadian democracy, education, consumerism and multiculturalism. There is no engagement with why Canadians are in a position to provide “a hand up” or why people in Africa and Asia are in need of our partnership and aid. Exhibition signs and descriptions reaffirm the idea that Canada empowers others, and that local development projects are dependent on Canadian support. In the section on Afghanistan, for instance, elections, women’s ability to access education and the restoration of cultural landmarks are attributed to “Canadian leadership.” While the exhibition states that Afghanistan has been “ravaged by decades of war,” there is no acknowledgment that Canada has been a partner to the U.S. and NATO, political entities that Malalai Joya, a suspended Afghanistan parliament member, describes as having “occupied my country...” (Joya 2010). Suffering and poverty are localized, as if they exist outside global historical or social contexts, including the context of the racially coded security discourse of the “war on terror.”

The question “What is Canada’s role in a world where poverty and hopelessness thrive?” is printed on a large banner that welcomes viewers into the exhibition hall; the question shapes the exhibition’s pedagogical strategies from the beginning. Although all of the projects depicted in the exhibition are sponsored by the AKDN, the history and structure of the network are marginalized within a narrative of Canadian goodwill. The phrase “in a world that remains troubled, Canada is needed more than ever” is repeated on panels and banners throughout the exhibition.

In her analysis of the Canadian peacekeeper mythology, Sherene Razack (2004) suggests that Canada is much more in need of the world than the world is in need of Canada to keep peace. She concludes that we use suffering Others “to reconstitute ourselves as white knights and as victims, taking ourselves out of their histories” (166). Narratives of Canada’s place in the world are historically constructed through race, at least implicitly. When the dynamic of race within development discourse has been taken up, critics have focused on critiquing development as the continuation of the colonial “white man’s burden.” In Desire for Development, Barbara Heron contends that “whiteness is constituted through
doing what is ‘right’” (2007: 9). The development enterprise validates Northern bourgeois superiority within the enduring idea of progress, wherein the white subject gains a “sense of entitlement and obligation to intervene globally” in order to better the lives of others (36). In Heron’s and Maria Eriksson Baaž’s (2005) studies, research interviews with white European and Canadian development workers are used to argue that development work constitutes the performance of whiteness. As I argue above, race is crucial to understanding how Orbinski and Lewis are produced as figures of the global citizen. However, if we limit the examples of benevolence to the representation of white development workers, to what extent do we foreclose recognition of the more complex racial politics involved in contemporary formulations of benevolence?

Canada is marked as white when development agencies such as World Vision and Plan Canada appeal to Canadians to sponsor a child and “give a gift of hope” (Plan 2010). In these agencies’ television appeals, the spokespeople and Canadian sponsors are almost always coded as white, in contrast to the faces of the children in need of aid, who are always brown or black. Bridges that Unite represents AKDN workers as “Agents of Change,” which suggests an overtly paternalistic relationship that contradicts the presentation of local individuals determining their own futures in the other components of the exhibition. Yet, individuals profiled in scrapbooks and via computer terminals in the exhibition reflect Canada’s racial, ethnic and religious diversity, perhaps disproportionally so. The collection of narratives and photographs provided by the AKFC workers reflects the Aga Khan’s characterization of Canada as a model of pluralism, with a responsibility to share its “national genius” with the rest of the world (Aga Khan 2008: 49). In Where Hope Takes Root, the Aga Khan writes that Canada is “able to harness the best from different groups, because [its] civil society is not bound by a specific language or race or religion” (49). As a result, the normative racial coding of the development enterprise is disrupted; the benevolent actor is not necessarily white.

This presumption of Canada as a pluralist state and meritocracy, and hence a model for cosmopolitanism, is markedly contrasted by Thobani’s contention that whiteness retains its exalted status within the politics of Canadian multiculturalism. Writes Thobani, “white people [are] constituted as tolerant and respectful of difference and diversity, while non-white people [are] instead constructed as perpetually and irredeemably monocultural, in need of being taught the virtues of tolerance and cosmopolitanism” (2007: 148). In the example of the Agent of Change (AKDN 2007) narratives, however, it is predominantly non-white, non-Christian Canadians who expound on Canada’s moral leadership. In my analysis here, I focus on the profiles of Agents of Change who appear racialized as not-white. For instance, one Agent of Change asserts that Canada’s “approach to difference and diversity is important” and that “Canada values a pluralist, multicultural society,” unlike the United States. Another Agent, who
self-identifies as an immigrant who has chosen to live in Canada, contends that “One of the unique things about Canada is its ethnic diversity. So when people are exposed to difference they realize that at the end of the day we are human.”

More standard development rhetoric describing the “chaos” of India or the way in which helping others is personally satisfying is also evident in these narratives, though more often by visibly white Agents. As well, photographs with captions that identify “typical villages” and unnamed “African girls” are features of many of the profiles. Despite the colonial echoes of the term “Agent of Change” and the rhetoric of many of the narratives presented in the exhibition, the benevolence of the Agents is constituted not by whiteness, per se, but by the ideal of pluralism, both rhetorically and in the composition of the profiles of a diverse group of Agents.

If civility, tolerance and cosmopolitanism have been produced as specifically white characteristics in the Canadian context, how do we account for this emphasis on pluralism as necessary for the development project? In her work on transnational solidarity activists, Gada Mahrouse defines whiteness as a discursive location that is not synonymous with skin colour; therefore, “the boundaries of whiteness shift over time and place” (2008: 90). Although her work focuses primarily on activists who self-identify as white, she contends that “as Westerners who carry the Canadian passport, in those geographical contexts, the activists of colour also came to represent whiteness, albeit to a lesser degree” (2009a: 671). The way in which these boundaries shift makes this sense of whiteness particularly unstable and its privileges for the visibly not-white person tenuous. For instance, reflecting on her own position as a woman of colour working on development projects in Bangladesh, Uma Khotari (2006) explains that expertise is often associated with white skin in the development context. Her position as an expatriate consultant and a racialized as not-white woman breaches “the previously stable boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Khotari 2006: 16).

Many of the Agent of Change profiles assert a celebratory Canadian pluralism as the basis for an Agent’s desire to aid others; however, there are also examples that trouble the hegemonic rhetoric of white/Canadian benevolence. One profiled worker, for instance, describes how he was able to use his skills in wireless technology to volunteer for His Highness the Aga Khan in Afghanistan. This narrative is one of the few that overtly identifies with the Aga Khan and the AKDN, rather than with Canada. Stated within the context of the exhibition rhetoric that the world needs more Canada, the Aga Khan’s assertion that “the average Afghan wants the same things as every normal person” appropriates “normal” from its Canadian associations with whiteness, while nonetheless constructing it within familiarly modern terms: normal people want democratic elections, schools and decent transportation systems. Another profiled Agent of Change says that the childhood experience of being a Boy Scout taught him the value of volunteerism, which he describes as a critical dimension of Canadian
identity and the humanistic principles of Islamic ethics. These two examples allude to the way in which the AKDN’s development philosophy is distinct from Western humanitarianism. While the AKDN provides examples of benevolence, their exhibition also reflects the way in which the structure of “attitudes” that underwrite benevolence are neither singular nor reducible to the performance of white identity.

In Where Hope Takes Root, the Aga Khan expresses his frustration with Western media representations of the AKDN as philanthropic or entrepreneurial. He writes: “What is not understood is that this work is, for us, a part of our institutional responsibility. It flows from the office of Imam to improve the quality of worldly life for the concerned communities” (2008: 126). While the Aga Khan emphasizes that many Islamic values—unity within diversity, patience, tolerance and open communication—are consistent with Christian teachings, he argues that the Western world has come to associate secularism with tolerance and religion with intolerance. While many Canadian organizations continue to imply a Christian framework for the project of aid, the construction of Orbinski and Lewis as cosmopolitan figures, and the rhetoric of global citizenship more generally, reflects the way in which the obligation to aid others is produced as secular. For example, large orange signs throughout Bridges that Unite identify various ways in which development is “the way forward for Canada.” In Canada, an attitude and frame of reference for benevolence is the presumption of Canadian exceptionality: Canada is fortunate, tolerant and pluralist, unlike other places in the world, apparently, particularly those places in need of aid. To some degree, the Aga Khan reaffirms this perception, arguing that Canadians have the obligation to “[share] the many forms of human knowledge and experience that create and sustain a civil society of quality” (54). In order to do so, we “must see real enrichment in life’s purpose in [our] willingness to help” (54). The Aga Khan’s discomfort with Western understandings of humanitarianism and his proviso of how we understand our ethical role as helpers reflect the limits of reducing the contemporary discourse of benevolence to whiteness/Canadianness.

In a presentation on the AKDN, Noha Nasser described how Ismailis challenge traditional notions of nation and identity. As a de-territorialized community that has no desire to create a homeland, Ismaili identity is not imagined within the framework of the nation (Nasser n.d.). Ismailis conceive of themselves as having a transnational identity, or both Canadian and transnational identities, which might suggest a somewhat different structure of reference for humanitarianism than that of the dominant Canadian framework for development and global citizenship. Lewis, Orbinski and others like them perform their roles as global citizens by leaving their home-nation to help or represent Others elsewhere. The Bridges that Unite exhibition reinforces the notion of Canadian exceptionality in such a way as to almost completely usurp the Ismaili ethical framework. The Ismaili structure of attitude and reference is overtly absent in the exhibition, apart from the narratives
of a few Agents of Change. Nonetheless, if the transnational is not simply an aspiration or ideal but a structure of reference that shapes one’s understanding of place and identity, does the AKDN escape the colonial implications of benevolence? To what extent is the structure of reference for AKDN workers who conceive of their identities as both Canadian and transnational different from the structure of reference for Lewis, Orbinski, or Heron’s research subjects?

Narda Razack (2009) suggests that a complex form of positioning and identity is common to all people in Canada who are racialized as not white. She argues that many racialized Canadians are marginalized, and that their ancestral homelands are regarded as degenerate. Many share mixed feelings about being Canadian, feelings that reinforce affiliations to the homeland and beyond that are distinct from white Canadian identity (16, 17). Reflecting on her own positioning during a work trip to her birth country, Trinidad, Razack recognizes that she “perceived how our scripts in the North are continuously tinged with the stains of neo and post colonialism and imperialistic traditions,” and she recognizes that her “context and struggles differed significantly from [her] ‘local’ colleagues” (N. Razack 2000: 76). Similarly, Rasna Warah reflects on how her interview with Mberita Katela, a woman living in Nairobi’s Kibera slum, served to translate the woman into little more than the example of a statistic:

I was objectifying her, seeing her as part of a problem that needed to be solved. […] This allowed me to perceive her as being “different” from me and bestowed on her an “otherness” that clearly placed her as my inferior, worthy of my sympathy. (2008: 4)

Although Warah is differently situated in the development context than the white volunteers that Heron and Baaz study, she has nonetheless internalized benevolence in a way she characterizes as distinctly “self-serving.”

For those Agents who are racialized as not white, development work overseas may also be seen as a way to assert their belonging to the nation in terms of the imaginary of tolerance and pluralism. Furthermore, the words, actions and photographic presence of development workers who are racialized as not-white reinforces the idea that Canada is the pluralist, tolerant state it purports to be; the diverse, educated group of Agents of Change provide proof of Canada’s multicultural civility. However, the narratives that frame development work in terms of the ethics of Islam, rather than nation, trouble the idea that benevolence is distinctly white/Canadian. To return to Mamdani’s formulation of Culture Talk, the representation of the Agents of Change emphasizes culture and difference over relations of power and privilege, and reflect ideals that can be associated with the good, modern or respectable Muslim. Although I recognize that the AKFC may have a number of reasons for framing its work in terms of Canadian identity, the fact that the AKDN’s history and philosophy is so muted in comparison to the rhetoric of Canadian exceptionalism and leadership is particularly significant.
In this respect, it is important to remember that the contemporary discourse that underwrites global citizenship coexists with discourses of security through which the foreign/Muslim/Other is produced as a threat.

While the figure of the racialized as not-white global citizen, and particularly one self-identifying as Muslim, is not the “same” as the white male celebrity figure, it is nonetheless a figure of benevolence. These alternate narratives within the _Bridges that Unite_ exhibition provide distinct structures of attitude (Islamic ethics) and reference (transnational identity) but ultimately reinforce the prevailing norm that “we” Canadians are enablers and capacity builders in a world divided into the structural binary of the fortunate and unfortunate. The exhibition reinforces hegemonic narratives of Canadian identity as innocent, peaceable and exceptional. As such, it reaffirms the material politics of benevolence and our “sense of entitlement and obligation to intervene globally” (Heron 2007: 36). I have sought to acknowledge a complex racial politics of the shifting, unstable positioning of the racialized or marginalized Canadian in reference to white normativity in _Bridges that Unite_ exhibition; however, the exhibition does not disturb the colonial politics of benevolence so much as reveal the way in which benevolence cannot be limited to whiteness. Rather, benevolence may be characterized as the signature of modernity.

**Benevolence as the Signature of Modernity**

I identify benevolence as the signature of modernity because the structure of attitude and reference that benevolence provides in the contemporary Canadian and North Atlantic context is not figured as the performance of whiteness. Rather, benevolence is articulated as the recognition of the dignity of the unfortunate Other as human—not regardless of race, but as if the history of race and racism does not exist. Benevolence has become associated with tolerance and pluralism, which ironically affirm Canadian distinction in the examples I have analyzed. As Thobani argues, tolerance is associated with whiteness, maintaining the exalted status of the white citizen against the racialized Other who needs to be taught tolerance. Yet, I think tolerance and pluralism can also be seen as associated with a sense of the modern that is not always confined to whiteness/Westernness. The Aga Khan invokes the idea of modernization in a way that seems consistent with theories of global citizenship, cosmopolitanism and Canadian civility, although it is derived from a tradition and worldview that is not Western. Each of the examples I have discussed affirm the ideal of progress toward a modernity that Canada (and the West) are seen as having already “achieved”: democracy, equality, human rights, multiculturalism. To argue that benevolence is the signature of modernity is not to suggest that because colour-blindness is articulated through its rhetoric, benevolence no longer reflects racial discourses. As figures of global citizenship, Lewis and Orbinski articulate their humanitarian ethics and
are represented in a way that shows the continued significance of the cultural capital of whiteness, and particularly of white masculinity. These figures embody whiteness, but they perform modernity. They are the subjects of our sympathy and reverence because they espouse modern ideals of compassion, respect for others and colour-blindness.

While Paul Gilroy argues that forms of “identity and solidarity that derive from class, gender, sexuality and region, have made a strong sense of racial difference unthinkable to the point of absurdity,” he also contends that despite the lack of “any strong belief in integral races,” racism continues to be enacted (2005: 120,122). This signature of modernity reflects a deep ambivalence: racism without race. Benevolence affirms our common humanity at the same time that discourses of security reconstitute a racially ordered world, constructing ever greater anxiety about who belongs and who does not belong to the nation. As Sherene Razack contends, however, the humanitarian impulse reflects a “nasty racial subtext”: “Can a Canadian imagine himself without these bodies of colour?” (S. Razack 2009: 818-19).

I have argued that benevolence is no longer confined to the white subject, but it is still informed by race thinking. The racial subtext of benevolence is the fact that the body in need is always depicted as brown or black in the documentaries or the development education exhibition. The racial subtext is the way in which the humanitarian’s spectacular assertions of the Other’s dignity reinforce the humanitarian’s distinction as more fully human. Following Fassin’s “politics of life,” humanitarians are actors capable of self-awareness and representation, and the risks they take are marked and mourned against the expendability of the life of the Other. The “poor” are homogenized and essentialized. Without history or character, they are to be represented, explained, pitied and saved. Pheng Cheah argues that “the efficacy of these new cosmopolitanisms is generated by, and structurally dependent on, the active exploitation and impoverishment of the peripheral majorities” (2006: 11). Benevolence, as a structure of attitude and reference, produces violence and structural inequality as poverty and misfortune; our relationship with the Other-in-need begins when we ask ourselves how we can help. Benevolence in its contemporary formation is the performance not only of white civility but also of pluralism and tolerance; however, benevolence denies histories of race and racism at the same time that it reinforces the complex ontology of inequality that is the ongoing legacy of racism.
Notes

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1. While both Lewis and Orbinski critique global economic structures to some degree, their criticism of the West focuses much more on its failure to do enough to “help” rather than its role in producing underdevelopment. The action that they identify as the work of humanitarians emphasizes aid rather than structural change.


3. Heron notes that Canadian development workers tend to be white women (2007: 158-59). Because of their subject groups, the research of Heron (2005) and Baaz (2005) implies that development workers are homogeneously white.

4. The network was founded and is guided by His Highness the Aga Khan, the 49th hereditary Imam of the Shia Ismaili Muslims (AKDN 2007).


References


