

The White Elephant in the Room: Anti-Asian Racism in Canada

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I have been thinking a lot about the surge in anti-Asian assaults and hate crimes lately. As a historian I am regularly asked to explain the history of anti-Asian racism and how that history can help us analyze what is happening now. The connection between our past and our present can be challenging for many people to fully grasp.

Perhaps thinking about elephants might help. Not real elephants of course, but the various ways we use the word “elephant” to indicate something we think is important; “the elephant in the room,” or the parable of the blind men and the elephant. I have found over the years that people have difficulty talking about, let alone understanding, the legacies of historical anti-Asian racism in today's world. It might be useful to talk about elephants, and how they can help us understand the enduring power of white supremacy in Canada.

Note that I used the term *white supremacy* instead of racism. For many people the words *white supremacy* conjures images of the Ku Klux Klan, Nazis, and angry mobs with flaming torches. Surely Canadians are not those people. We are a polite people, much better behaved than that. And yet sheet music for the bar song “White Canada Forever” was a best-seller in the early-20th Century. The political slogan “A White Man's Province” helped Richard MacBride win election as Premier of British Columbia. There was a Ku Klux Klan headquarters in the tiny Vancouver neighbourhood of Shaughnessy in the 1920s. That is clearly white supremacy. So why would we continue to use the term *racism* rather than *white supremacy*?

The idiomatic saying “the elephant in the room” generally refers to an important subject in a discussion that people are actively avoiding. So, during a conversation about solving a problem, someone might eventually say “shouldn't we deal with the elephant in the room?” as a signal to talk about the real issue. Like an actual elephant sitting in the room, the issue is too obvious not to notice, but people are uncomfortable or unwilling to discuss it, in fear of the terrible ramifications that may arise for even admitting the existence of this large beast in their midst.

White supremacy is Canada's elephant in the room. Many Canadians deny that there is racism in Canada or instead argue that there *used* to be racism, but it is now gone. Others may admit that there was a history of racism but find it very uncomfortable to talk about the connection between white supremacy and racism. Without dealing with white supremacy, racism makes no sense. Those of us who feel the effects of anti-Asian racism understand that the generic category of "Asian" defines us as targets and is not a definition in our control. It does not matter if you or your ancestors came from some specific place called "China" or "Vietnam" or "Pakistan" or some generic place called "Asia" or "the Orient." It does not matter if you have grown up here and only speak English. It does not matter if you have a fancy haircut and wear expensive clothes. You can still be attacked as "Asian" and scapegoated as the cause of unaffordable housing, corrupt money laundering, or COVID-19.

The process of racialization defines you by making you a target—you do not get to say whether you want to be Asian. Dakota Holmes, an Indigenous woman, was violently assaulted on May 16, 2020, because the attacker thought she was "Chinese." The attack on Holmes was not simply a mistake revealing the attacker's ignorance or stupidity. All too often the term "racism" describes the victims and targets of white supremacy—as in "anti-Asian racism," or "anti-Black racism," or "anti-Indigenous racism"—subtly switching the focus from the cause to the effect. This is the equivalent of referring to "the sexual assault of women" as if the problem should be considered solely for its effects on women rather than thinking about what is causing assaults on women in the first place.

Racism, that product of white supremacy, targets people in a variety of ways—the suffering afflicted by anti-Black racism is different from anti-Asian racism is different from the ongoing colonial dispossession of Indigenous peoples—but always serves a common cause; to lump people together into "race" categories that target the victims as the problem. This then suggests that people who benefit from not having a racial category are not the problem. You don't have to think of yourself as "white" for racism to exist. Indeed, that is one of the benefits of the politics of white supremacy—the magical alchemy of creating racialized categories that everyone but you belong to. But what is "racialized?" Some people are racialized while others get to believe and act as if they are not. The term "visible minority" is defined by those who get to be "invisible;" those who are the "normal Canadians" to which the nation belongs and for whom it was built.

One of the magical outcomes of the political success of embedding white supremacy into our institutions over the first century of our history was how it created foundational beliefs about who belongs in Canada (and who does not), who is deserving of wealth and comfort (and who is not), who owns the land we live on (and who was already here). Under white supremacy, those who profit from that sense of normalcy, belonging, and privilege do not have to consider themselves white. It is one of the singular accomplishments of white supremacy that those who are considered white can believe they are not and can believe that they do not benefit from white supremacy. This is a luxury not afforded to those who are racially targeted as Black or Asian or whose continued existence as Indigenous peoples is constantly erased or considered irrelevant.

The greatest historical legacy of white supremacy in Canada is that it was so successful in defining every aspect of law and society for the first century of the country's existence. When laws were changed in the 1960s to make racial discrimination illegal, the everyday practices of white supremacy were so normalized and entrenched that just saying that racism was over could seem to make it true. When racial discrimination in housing was outlawed, for example, how many people went to jail, or paid a fine, for continuing to benefit from owning homes and making money from land stolen from Indigenous peoples? When racial discrimination in employment was outlawed, how many people gave up jobs in industries that were exclusively white because non-whites had not been allowed in those jobs? The structural effects of racial exclusion built upon white supremacy was the norm. And the norm remained, built upon the hierarchy of white supremacy, and continuing to define who deserved to have more and who deserved to have less. But Canada as a nation could say that white supremacy had ended and claim that racism was now a thing of the past.

Of course, it is not. But from that point onwards, if you argue that the system remained unfair, the removal of the overt language of race from law and policy has made it *more*—not less—*difficult* to assert the continuing effects of white supremacy. Announcing the end of overtly racist laws did not serve to end the inequities that had been built over a century, but rather to *erase them from sight*. The most insidious effect of this magical sleight of hand was that it required the proof that people were acting like Nazis or Ku Klux Klan members for the public to believe that there was continued racism in Canada. White supremacy seemingly no longer exists other than a few bad apples. Racism was a thing of the past from when we were racists. But now we are not. The Devil's greatest trick, it is said, is convincing people that he does not exist.

The Blind Men and the Elephant

White supremacy, upon which Canada was built for over 100 years, continues to be the elephant in the room when we discuss the effects of racism. While the term may make people feel uncomfortable, not seeing the elephant in the room means that some are 'shocked' or 'surprised' when hearing of a racist incident. The feeling of surprise, as if racism is abnormal and suddenly coming out of nowhere, *is the product of white supremacy*. Surprise is the most effective tool of white supremacy; it works to silence and blind us to the elephant's work. And when you feel something isn't quite right, when you are passed over for a promotion even though you know the person who used to report to you (and who you helped train) is not as deserving as you but they are white and you are not, you wonder, *is it just me?* When you are the only non-white person in the room and a decision is made without giving thought about what it might mean for people who might not enjoy the luck of being white, you wonder, *should I say something?* When you see an elderly woman spat on or physically attacked for being "Asian," you wonder, *should I be surprised?*

If you have had these experiences and wonder if it was racism, you are like one of the characters in the Hindu and Sufi parable of the "blind men and the elephant." The story (popularized in English through translations of Sufi poet Omar Khayyam) tells of a group of blind men each feeling different parts of an elephant. They each describe what they feel, and each think that what they have experienced a distinct animal. But they are each limited by their own perspective and do not realize that there is only a single elephant in the room. If you wonder if what happened to you is unique, it is because you can only feel one part of the elephant. If you, or anyone you know, felt surprised or shocked to hear about an incident of racism in Canada, you have been blinded so that you cannot see the elephant in the room.

This is the greatest trick that the long history of white supremacy in Canada has wrought. The magical racism of Canada is that of the invisible elephant. You don't see it when one of the legs is crushing you or someone you love. Or when another leg is crushing someone who is Black. Or when yet another leg is crushing someone who is Indigenous. You barely understand why you feel this weight on your back; you cannot fathom that this is yet another part of the same beast crushing the others. You have been blinded to the huge elephant in the room, the one that stands on top of some but not others. The elephant has pulled a magic trick indeed, we literally cannot see what is crushing us.

But you may ask, isn't everyone racist? What about when a non-white person is racist? Doesn't that mean that white supremacy is gone? No, you are mistaking the elephant's effects for the elephant itself. Not all perpetrators of anti-Asian assaults need to be "white" for the substantive cause to be systemic and structural white supremacy. In fact, the so-called "model minority" myth is a great example of how the politics of white supremacy excel at pitting non-whites against each other. In the United States, when African Americans and Chicana activists were protesting for civil rights and equal pay, Japanese Americans were extolled in the *New York Times* as "A Success Story" for seemingly overcoming racism "quietly" without protest. In the 1980s *Newsweek* named Asian Americans a "model minority" for being highly-educated and not requiring government support. The weaponizing of success pitted Asians against those who were Black and Brown, splintering coalitions and obfuscating who benefitted from such 'divide and rule' tactics. Thus, when newspaper stories claimed "reverse discrimination" because African Americans and other under-represented applicants were being admitted into Ivy League schools with lower test scores than Asian Americans, what was forgotten was the large proportion of overwhelmingly white students who had historically been admitted with far lower test scores. The pitting of non-whites against each other is one of the elephant's best disappearing tricks.

If we use the term "model minority" to describe Asians in Canada, we risk confusing our Canadian elephant for the very different elephant in the United States (one that uses a different bag of tricks). Many Asians, and others considered non-white in Canada, have enjoyed socio-economic success. We clamour for a piece of possessive belonging in Canada. For decades we have argued against racial exclusion by asserting that we deserve to have a piece of the pie that has been denied to us. We have fought and died for inclusion. We have remade ourselves to be deemed worthy. We remove as many indicators of our non-belonging as possible; we stop speaking our maternal non-English languages, we stop eating food that our grandparents love, we change our names to something easier to pronounce in English. We sacrifice and work hard to go to the right school, earn the best degree, work at the best job. We invest in success and earn the nice house in the good neighbourhood in the right school district for our children.

We invest in success as a tool for getting more of what we want. But that success is weaponized against us. When anti-Asian agitators complained about Chinese and Japanese in the late-19th and early-20th Centuries, they may have complained that Asians were inferior, but it was the economic success and the "hard-working" character of Asians that they saw as the real threat. The looting of Chinese Canadian and Japanese Canadian businesses in the 1907 Vancouver Race Riot was born of economic resentment that scapegoated Asians. The 1942–49 dispossession of Japanese Canadians was more about their pre-war "success" in fishing, logging, farming, and business than any actual wartime threat (we should never

forget that Japanese Canadians were exiled from BC for *longer after the end of WWII* than during the war itself). The paradox of anti-Asian racism is that our very investments in success are used as weapons against us. Our possessive belonging is provisional. If too many of us are in a classroom, when does that school become “too Asian”? If too many of us move into a neighbourhood, when does it become “too Asian”? Our presence is not normal, our absence is.

One of the reasons that this year’s surge in anti-Asian violence has had such a visceral impact for many “Asian” Canadians is that these investments in success—and the sacrifices that they often entail—have come into question. My great job and big house and fancy clothes will not save me from being yelled at or spit on or shoved. My investment in belonging will not save me from racism. And that has been a difficult fact to process for many, especially those who must now question what they had to give up to earn this belonging. What if going to the right school and studying the right subjects meant the loss of your ability to speak to your grandmother in her own language? What if your drive to leave your family origins behind meant the loss of your ability to teach your own children what it means for their ancestors to have come from a place far away? What if the cost of success is not knowing who you really are?

After a long, terrible, year of anti-Asian racism, it might seem like a victory to just walk the streets without fear, to not worry about your mother being shoved on the sidewalk, or your grandparents being spit on while shopping. We might seek to double-down in our investments in success, buy some extra security with a little more education, a bigger dose of status and belonging in Canada. But what are we buying into when we want more of that pie?

The Crushing Cost to Canada of Our White Elephant

The nature of anti-Asian racism in Canada is built around scapegoating and exclusion. We are perpetually foreign. We do not belong. When things go wrong, it is always our fault. We might be tempted to simply argue for a better belonging—we have worked hard and never complained and therefore deserve to have our fair share. We contribute to Canada—we helped build the railroad; we deserve to belong—but in fighting for a possessive belonging, we risk mistaking the elephant’s leg for the elephant itself.

We use the term “white elephant” to talk about a gift that costs so much to take care of that it hampers us from doing other, more important, things. The donation, for example, of a fancy museum building whose construction goes so over-budget that there is not enough money to run the museum programs. A gift of a fancy sports car that costs so much to constantly repair that you must sell the car you currently drive to work. The term comes from tales of clever Siamese kings who would give their enemies the gift of a sacred white elephant, seemingly a gift of great value, as a token of respect and esteem. But as the elephant could not actually be used for work, and needed to be pampered and treated as sacred, the ongoing cost of keeping the gift would bankrupt the new owner.

In British Columbia, we live on the unceded territory of Indigenous peoples who were here long before us. For all of us whose ancestors migrated to Canada over the last few centuries, we live as uninvited guests on the traditional and ancestral territories of people who have been here for millennia. This is their home. We live in the fancy rooms with large windows built on their land after relegating their communities to tiny rooms with locked doors that we call “reserves.” The Indian Act of 1876, a foundational act of legislation passed by Parliament soon after Confederation, unilaterally legalized this system of colonial dispossession. We live and thrive using the fenced goods of this act of theft. This is the white elephant that Canada gifted all of us. This was the birthing of the elephant in the room.

If we understand the history of anti-Asian racism only as the series of exclusionary and discriminatory laws targeting Chinese and other Asians, we will continue to be blind to the whole elephant.

Disenfranchisement, the inability to testify or represent yourself in court, the economic restrictions designed to eliminate livelihoods, the immigration exclusions designed to keep Asians out of Canada, the denial of access to “pre-empted” land taken from Indigenous peoples to be given to white settlers—these are the stomping of the elephant’s leg trying to crush Asians. However, it is the last of these acts—the denial and exclusion of Indigenous people—that we should be careful to consider when we try to understand the elephant that stands astride us all.

White supremacy was a political gift that organized European migrants into a sense of powerful belonging in Canada. Historically white supremacy justified the stealing of land from people who were already here. White supremacy gave that land as gifts to newcomers who were considered white, while also denying and under-serving all other newcomers who were seen as non-white. They did not belong. They were perpetually foreign. White supremacy gave the best jobs to those who were white, reserved the best neighbourhoods and the best positions for decision-making and power. White supremacy was the gift that kept on giving, even after the elephant played the magical trick of disappearing from the room.



But white elephants are a costly, debilitating gift. For Canada, the white elephant of white supremacy has meant extolling ideals that we do not practice. At the worst, Canadians are revealed as hypocritical and blind to our own sins; at the best we are mocked as smug and self-delusional. If we keep feeding the white elephant in the room, if we keep it alive despite those who are crushed under its weight, we will continue to pay the costs.

If those who were formerly treated as “Orientals,” unwanted and unloved, want to belong by becoming fully “Canadian,” we need to be careful that we do not merely clamour for our own piece of possessive belonging in Canada. If we want to end anti-Asian racism, then we must not be blind to the white elephant in the room. If we aspire to live in a just and inclusive society, then justice for some cannot be at the cost of justice for all. We must build alliance with others being crushed by the same elephant. We must reject tactics that divide and rule by offering shiny baubles to one at the cost of ignoring the cries of others. Blindly chopping off one leg of the elephant is not enough. We must be prepared to commit to eradicating the whole elephant, not just the part that we can feel and see. Otherwise, the elephant will survive to surprise and crush us again because of our choice to willfully remain blind.