

It's All in the Harmony: The Role of Harmony Ideology in Canadian Reparations.

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## **Introduction**

Canada prides itself on its long-standing 'cultural mosaic'. This term seeks to capture how Canada's diverse cultural, racial, and ethnic populations are respected and foundational to Canadian identity. Since the proliferation of the cultural mosaic image in the 1970's, Canadian multicultural policy has been through several iterations, with contemporary policy emphasizing harmony. Despite decades of multicultural policy, systemic racial inequality remains prevalent in Canada, with African Canadians being uniquely impacted by such systemic racism. Although often left out of Canadian history, Canada participated in and benefited from the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade. This participation has gone largely unacknowledged by the government, damaging the relations between the Canadian state and the African Diaspora, including not only African Canadians but all of those who experience the long-standing legacies of slavery. With this in mind, Reparatory Justice in Canada is integral to creating positive relations between Canada, the African diaspora, and Caribbean Dominions. I propose that the implementation of harmony ideology into Canada's multicultural policy must be deconstructed in order to meaningfully pursue such reparatory justice.

### **Historical Contextualization: The Trans Atlantic Slave Trade**

The Trans Atlantic Slave Trade refers to centuries of Europeans stealing Africans off the Western African coast and the forcible transportation to the Americas. Once transported to the Americas, the Africans were enslaved on plantations and systemically abused and dehumanized by white plantation owners and workers. In this case, the Americas include the United States of America, all Caribbean nations (CARICOM), and nations on the coast of South America, such as Brazil and going inwards to nations such as Colombia (Táíwò, 2022). This description offers

only a snapshot of the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade; in order to understand its legacies, we first must unpack why it began.

In 1492, Columbus discovered the ‘New World’ (Williams, 2021a). This uncovering by the Europeans set into motion a race for European nations to colonize these lands. Conflict among European nations broke out over how to determine which nation gets which region. In 1580, England put an end to the conflict by stating that whoever could occupy the region got to hold claim to it (Williams, 2021a). England then began quickly laying claim to several regions, including Canada, Bermuda, Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, and many more Caribbean islands that came to be known as the British West Indies. In Eric Williams’ book *Capitalism and Slavery* (2021a), he describes how Britain made distinctions between colonies like Canada and the British West Indies,

“The first is the self-sufficient and diversified economy of small farmers...The second type is the colony which has facilities for the production of staple articles on a large scale for an export market” (p. 2).

This distinction is significant in understanding the extremely varied experiences of British colonialism in Canada and the British West Indies. Whereas Canada was seen as relatively self-sufficient, small-scale farmers, the British West Indies were seen as a vehicle for the mass production of goods for export. The West Indies climate and topography made growing the highly sought-after sugar cane possible in a British colony. At first, indigenous Caribbeans were forced into slavery but were deemed by the British government as inadequate and inefficient (Williams, 2021a). Britain then began shipping white indentured servants to cultivate the land, but there was soon outcry in England due to the poor treatment of these labourers

(Williams, 2021a). Note that this outcry only took place when it was white Europeans being sent to labour, not indigenous or black people. Not only was there an outcry in England, but there were not enough European labourers to uphold the level of production sought by the British government. This is the pivotal moment that Britain shifted their focus to the African Continent.

Since 1493, Africa had been seen as a Portuguese monopoly, as the Portuguese had been enslaving Africans and selling them to Spain in the West Indies. It was not until the end of the British Civil War in 1660 that England entered into the slave trade in order to supply the British West Indies with free labour (Williams, 2021b). Williams (2021b) estimates that the total number of slaves brought to the West Indies by Britain between 1680 and 1786 was over 2 million (p.24). During the 300 years of slavery in the British West Indies, enslaved Africans were systemically dehumanized, turned into objects, and faced with constant violence and brutality from the state (Du Bois, 1992). This systemic inequality forms the basis for the current global economic system, racial capitalism (Du Bois, 1992). Whereas capitalism is an economic system in which the free market is foundational and competition is the driver for innovation, racial capitalism is the acknowledgement that capitalism can not exist without racist exploitation (Williams, 2021a).

### **Racial Capitalism: The Canadian Context**

Canada's history of colonization looks very different from what was experienced in the British West Indies. The French first made contact with Canada in 1534 and began inhabiting what is now Quebec and Nova Scotia (Canada Gov., 2025). After 229 years of French colonial rule, the British took over the previously French colony, making Canada a British colony in 1763 (Canada Gov., 2025). Despite the change of power, French culture and practices remained

dominant in Quebec, and in parts of New Brunswick and Manitoba, creating what will come to be known as a multicultural society.

Similar to the experiences of the indigenous Carribeans, indigenous groups on Turtle Island (what is now Canada) experienced physical and cultural genocide at the hands of the British colonial government. Although in this case, forced labour was not the goal, instead, the goal was to displace indigenous people to gain land and resources for farming, hunting, logging, and mining ventures. Williams (2021a) noted this description of Canada from 1840, “no lottery, with a few exorbitant prizes and a large number of blanks, but a secure and certain investment.” (p. 2). This demonstrates a difference in thought towards the purpose of the Canadian colonial project and the Caribbean colonial project; Canada was not an immediate money maker, simply a long-term investment. Long-term investments are to be nurtured and developed in order to reach their full potential, unlike fast money production, which is to be made and then discarded when no longer profitable. The perceived disposability of the British West Indies and the people within them is what demarcates the long term outcomes of the British West Indies and Canada. The British West Indies functioned as the engine that financed the colonial exploits of the larger British empire (Beckles, 2021b). Those working the engine, the enslaved, never saw that money return to them or their lands; instead, that money was sent to develop places like Canada. But Canada was not simply a passive recipient of this money; many Canadian businesspeople invested in the Slave Trade, purchased, shipped, and distributed products from plantations, and owned slaves on Canadian land (Cooper & Baylis, 2019).

Cooper and Baylis (2019) provide a prime, and local, example of Atlantic Canada's active participation in the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade on Canadian soil and abroad. *The Report on Lord Dalhousie's History on Slavery and Race* sought to uncover the history of slavery associated with Dalhousie University and, more broadly, illustrates why reparations are needed in Canada. This report challenges the common idea that Canada did not have and support slavery. After the war of 1812, black loyalists came to Canada under British obligation to help them for serving Britain in the British-American War (Cooper & Baylis, 2019). "Dalhousie's attitudes and policies marginalized African Nova Scotians in almost every aspect of their lives." (Cooper & Baylis, 2019, 13). This marginalization took many forms, from systemic ostracization from white society and institutions to slavery. Lord Dalhousie's marginalization of black people was not unique to him; Nova Scotia had a large group of confederate supporters who financially benefited from the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade (Cooper & Baylis, 2019). Lord Dalhousie and other Atlantic Canadian elites had significant influence over the governance of the time, with the money made from slavery being invested into public projects and institutions and racist beliefs being embedded into countless Canadian institutions, including Dalhousie University (Cooper & Baylis, 2019).

### **What Next: Canadian Multiculturalism**

So far in this exploration of Canadian history, Canada is inhabited by Indigenous peoples, the French, the British (other early European settlers such as Scots and the Irish), and African Canadians. As several centuries pass by, millions of people immigrate to Canada from all over the world, bringing different cultures and ethnicities to this land. Despite the massive changes taking place over this time, racial capitalism remains the foundation of Canadian society. Even

after the emancipation of the formerly enslaved, systemic racism perpetuated large racial wage gaps, education gaps, racist and exclusionary policy, the displacement of historically black communities and countless other social inequalities (Beckles, 2021a). So then, with this glaring systemic inequality, how did the notion of a Canadian cultural mosaic form?

Up until the 1960s, the British remained the most powerful group in Canada (McElhinny, 2016). During the 1960s, French Canadians experienced significant growth in nationalism and began demanding that French language and culture be protected by the federal government (McElhinny, 2016). The government responded with a bill titled “Multilingualism Within a Bilingual Framework” (McElhinny, 2016, 51). The mandate of this bill focused on funding cultural activities, English and French language training, and inclusion into Canadian society (McElhinny, 2016). Twenty years later, in the 1980s, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms protected multiculturalism by recognizing the need to preserve cultural heritage (Canada Gov., 2024). McElhinny (2016) notes that it is at this time that multiculturalism was starting to be seen as an economic pursuit: “Prime Minister Brian Mulroney argued that 'our multicultural nature gives us an edge in selling to the world'” (52). Finally, in 1991, the Department of Multiculturalism and Citizenship was established in the federal government (McElhinny, 2016).

What does Canadian multiculturalism look like now? The Canadian Government published a report titled “*From Mosaic to Harmony: Multicultural Canada in the 21st Century*,” where Lock-Kunz and Sykes (2007) explore what multicultural policy looks like in the 21st

century and where it may be heading. In analyzing the history of multicultural policy, key metaphors for the goals of these policies are pulled out from every decade starting in the 1970s; from ‘mosaic’ to ‘level playing field’ to ‘belonging’ and finally, in the 21st century, ‘harmony’ (Lock Kunz & Sykes, 2007, 21). Harmony in this context refers to everyone in Canada peacefully participating in their shared communities, regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, and cultural heritage (Lock Kunz & Sykes, 2007, 20). Lock Kunz and Sykes (2007) state that the push for harmony stems from,

“Multicultural societies face[ing] the challenge of respecting cultural differences while fostering shared citizenship, conferring rights while demanding responsibilities, and encouraging integration but not assimilation.” (p. 20).

Throughout the report, the concept of a shared Canadian identity is prevalent and is cited as the “reference point” through which they propose modern solutions and the metaphor of harmony (Lock Kunz & Sykes, 2007, 21). The solutions proposed in the report include debunking myths, fostering mutual understanding, and improving government accountability (Lock Kunz & Sykes, 2007, 24). The shift from mosaic to harmony demonstrates a shift from simply coexisting in the same place to actually working and living together to form a shared Canadian Identity. Lock Kunz and Sykes (2007) claim that this shift is, in part, happening naturally, but that government policy has not kept up.

The shift to harmony is not random or new. Harmony ideology is a theory described in Nader’s 1994 text, *Essays on Controlling Processes*. First observed in the American legal system, harmony ideology theorizes on how power is disseminated through forced harmony (Nader, 1994). In the legal system, harmony ideology centers consensus as the ideal outcome of a legal dispute. This is an alternative to the previously dominant legal ideology, where

determining right and wrong is the desired outcome of the legal system (Nader, 1994). Although the former is still prevalent in the legal system, concepts of harmony and consensus are becoming increasingly common in disputes with the crown and large corporations. Nader gives the following example of the use of harmony ideology in the American legal system:

“American Indians on reservations are being persuaded by negotiators from Washington to take nuclear waste as a win-win solution - climbing out of their misery while contributing to their country” (Nader, 1994, 714).

I will be using this concept of forced harmony to analyze the current state of Canadian multicultural policy. This will lead me to theorize on how applying a repertory lens to multicultural policy would ameliorate the relationships between Canada and the British Caribbean Dominions.

### **What are reparations?**

To understand what reparations are, let's first turn to Marable (1981), who addresses systemic injustice by theorizing on what true liberation could look like for Black Americans. Marable argues that structural racism and wealth inequality are so embedded within contemporary American culture that a completely new system must emerge to uphold the rights of Black Americans (Marable, 1981). He denounces the idea that reform can be done within an existing system and instead focuses on the creation of a new social organization and nation-state (Marable, 1981). In this proposal, the concept of harmony ideology is not present as an agent of change. Instead, the inherent lack of harmony between white supremacist ideology and Black Americans calls for a complete restructuring.

Why Marable's position is important to the discussions of reparations is that reparations are based on the idea of systemic injustice, which is continued in the legacy of the Trans Atlantic

Slave Trade. Reparatory justice is not simply economic reparations; it includes the loss of culture, language, land, the persistent dehumanization of racialized people, and addressing continued systemic racism (Táíwò, 2022). In this sense, the current systems can not be maintained if reparatory justice is meaningfully pursued (Marable, 1981). CARICOM, an intergovernmental organization of 15 Caribbean nation-states and 5 associate members, has laid out a 10-point repertory justice plan which will serve as the understanding of repertory justice in this essay. The 10 points are: a full formal apology, repatriation, indigenous peoples development program, investment in cultural institutions, addressing the public health crisis, illiteracy eradication, African knowledge program, Psychological rehabilitation, technology transfer, and debt cancellation (CARICOM, n.d).

Acknowledging the systemic nature of racism is crucial to thinking about reparations and the role of harmony ideology. Marable, Cooper, and Baylis demonstrate how racism is built into the very foundation of the Canadian and American social systems. Although Canada and America are different contexts, many of the issues and proposed solutions from Marable resonate in Canada. Anti-black and anti-indigenous racism is built into the fabric of Canada. Because of this, reparations are needed for African Canadians and, just as Marable and Taiwo argue, systemic change is the only way to fully address this systemic racism (Marable, 1981; Taiwo, 2022).

So then, why has systemic change not happened in Canada? What is maintaining the system? Although there are many answers to these questions, let's circle back to the discussion of harmony ideology and multicultural policy as our focus. As per the Canadian government, multicultural policy is shifting towards prioritizing harmony in the 21st century (Lock Kunz &

Sykes, 2007). Although harmony is positioned as a positive for racialized communities, as it pushes a narrative of shared communities, the concept of harmony also paints a false picture of history. The assumption that everyone within a nation-state can live harmoniously presumes that everyone is treated relatively equally within the social structures. As Marable points out, how can black people live in harmony with a white supremacist system? When the Canadian government creates a narrative that harmony is not only possible but ideal, without any push for structural change, it drives the idea that the colonial oppression of racialized Canadians does not matter today. Furthermore, it vilifies people who seek to create structural change and labels them as being unharmonious with society. And just as Taiwo demonstrates that the stratified impacts of climate change are not random, it is not random that those who often seek structural change in Canada are racialized people.

Regarding who is maintaining this system of white supremacy in Canada, we must turn our attention to who benefits from the current system. Biholar (2022) addresses this question in their exploration of international law. International law was created as a means of upholding the power of the nations that perpetuated and benefited from the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade (Biholar, 2022). By excluding epistemologies from any other nation, nations such as Britain, America, and Canada continue to push colonial ideologies through court rulings (Biholar, 2022). Nader (1994) denounces the role international law plays in maintaining the power of America and argues that,

“...what is claimed to be universal here is instead hegemonic, developed in the United States in the 1970s and exported worldwide by an expanding alternative dispute resolution industry; it is a coercive harmony whose primary function is producing order of a repressive sort.” (715)

Here, Nader is taking the stance that the rise of alternative dispute resolution – the “shift of dispute resolution away from adjudication and arbitration toward negotiation” (715) – in international law is a form of “coercive harmony” which forces less powerful nations to succumb to the pressures of the West (Nader, 1994). This “coercive harmony” allows Western nations to maintain power by defining what “order” or civility looks like, continuing colonial rhetoric of the civilized versus the savage (Nader, 1994). It is no longer civilized to use conflict or the ethic of right versus wrong in international disputes, and instead, the culture of international negotiation requires peaceful discussions where everyone comes to a consensus (Nader, 1994). This is seen in *Reparations* in CBC’s docuseries *For The Culture*, where activist David Comissiong states that CARICOM had asked for an apology from Britain and Britain merely sent their regrets (Parris, 2024). What is made clear through this example is Britain’s attempt to squash any conflict or dissent through a middle ground position, and also that this is not adequate for CARICOM nations. That is the fallacy of harmony ideology: what is seen as harmony to the powerful is simply upholding a system to the benefit of those who created it. So then, harmony for whom? When we look back at the question of who upholds the white supremacist system in Canada, we must turn to the same institutions that push for a harmony ideology– the government and courts.

### **Canada and the Caribbean**

Returning to David Comissiong’s comments about the inadequacy of Britain’s ‘apology’ for their role in the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade, this further illustrates the tense relationship between CARICOM and Britain. Canada was a colony of Britain up until 1867, when it became

a dominion of Britain, later known as a member of the British Commonwealth. Being a member of the Commonwealth indicated a continued tie to the British monarchy, hence why the monarch of England must sign off on Canadian laws. Being a member of the British Commonwealth does not inherently mean that the nation is in favour of the actions of Britain, as demonstrated by the 10 Caribbean Commonwealth nations and 5 Caribbean British Overseas Territories. Although, as discussed above, Canada had a different relationship with Britain than the British West Indies did, and Canada has maintained a more positive association with the crown. In terms of commonwealth nations' relationships with one another, Canada should be held accountable for its support of the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade and participate in reparatory justice along with Britain. Where Britain is taking the attempted middle ground by issuing regrets instead of apologies, Canada has managed to stay out of the discussion altogether. Despite Canada's image as a beacon of harmonious international relations, not only has Canada historically perpetuated significant harm, but it continues to do so by upholding racial capitalism and harmony ideology in domestic and international fields (Biholar, 2022). Integrating reparatory justice into Canadian multicultural policy is one step towards making right on historical wrongdoings. It sets a stage for larger discussions of reparatory action by taking accountability for Canada's role in the systemic underdevelopment of the Caribbean. In doing so, Canada can begin to strengthen and repair its relationship with fellow Commonwealth and British Territories, fostering cultural and economic prosperity in nations ravaged by the horrors of racial capitalism.

It is now clear that reparations are required in Canada, but what is commonly seen as a policy in line with reparatory justice, multicultural policy, may be standing in the way of real structural change. Harmony ideology, making its way from the legal system into multicultural policy, has created the possibility of these policies disregarding the structural components of

racism. Anti-black and anti-indigenous racism is built into the structures that govern the lives of Canadians, and therefore, structural change is necessary for reparatory justice to be enacted.

When the policies which seek to directly address the fact that Canada is built upon the backs of so many people from different cultures and histories prioritize upholding those structures of oppression, these policies begin to act in opposition to those who it claims to serve. Those who are actually served by these policies are governments that can continue colonial hegemony by pushing harmony, just like the international courts. Harmony ideology needs to be critically analyzed not only in multicultural policy but in all the institutions it has proliferated into. If the legal system does not acknowledge structural racism, there is no hope in holding other structures accountable for ignoring deeply unharmonious pasts. Although looking towards a future of harmony is not inherently problematic, only looking forward, especially in the case of theorizing on multiculturalism, allows policy, curriculum, and the general public to forget about past wrongdoings. Furthermore, when the government takes actions to address historical injustice through means of apology and expects that harmony will follow, those who continue to feel unharmonious with the system are seen as anomalies and often criminalized for dissenting.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the colonial histories of British Commonwealth nations and territories are extremely variable. Where Canada is seen as a long-term investment, the Caribbean is forced into a fast-money-making plantation economy. This has proliferated into a contemporary divide commonly separated as ‘developed v. developing nations’ or the ‘Global South v. Global North’. Despite Canada and former British West Indies state all being part of the Commonwealth, their current positionality on a global scale is stratified along the lines of those who supported the

Trans Atlantic Slave Trade, and those who were victims of it. Canada's current addressing of racialized Canadians and the role they have played in the creation of Canada is done primarily through multicultural policy. Canadian Multicultural policy has subscribed to the harmony ideology as its theoretical grounding. Harmony ideology is a broad theoretical perspective that seeks to create peaceful and interconnected communities across cultures and heritages. Despite its seemingly positive goals, it risks enforcing colonial beliefs as natural, normal, and peaceful. This ignored the structural violence embedded within these same colonial belief systems and institutions. When such an ideology gets incorporated into federal policy, which seeks to address multiculturalism, these policies end up acting against the very people they claim to serve. Instead, by allowing a colonial government to determine what it means to live harmoniously in this society, and enforce that through the legal system, those who seek structural change that goes against said governments are oppressed. When this is considered in reference to the Canadian reparations movement, this movement must seek to push back against this narrative. Instead, the values and practices of reparatory justice must form the basis of Canadian multicultural policy. In doing so, Canada will be able to acknowledge the harm it's done, domestically and abroad, and work to repair relations between itself and the Caribbean. In this sense, reparatory justice is not just about fighting for certain actions by the government; it also requires changing the cultural frame of what harmony looks like. Harmony can be a goal of reparations movements, but it must be redefined to include justice for all, acknowledgement of history, and a truly equitable system for all Canadians.

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