

Author Meets Critic Forum on Daniel Coleman's *White Civility: The Literary Project of English Canada*

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[See table of contents](#)

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***Author Meets Critic Forum on
Daniel Coleman's White Civility:
The Literary Project of English Canada***

The publication of this Author Meets Critic forum on Daniel Coleman's *White Civility: The Literary Project of English Canada* is the culmination of a lengthy process. It began with the selection of a recent book of Canadian criticism that we, editors Jill Didur and Susan Gingell, judged to be an important and likely widely interesting intervention in current scholarly debates. Among the reasons we selected Coleman's book for the forum is the significance of the subject he addresses in the book: the collocation of whiteness, Britishness, and civility in the nation's popular literature from approximately 1850 to 1950, a collocation which underpins with augmenting force the hegemonic sense of "Canadianness" and the collateral discursive association of Euro-Canada's Others with incivility. Other reasons for our choosing *White Civility* include the quality of the scholarship on which it rests and Coleman's skilled and ethical grappling with difficult issues. In his 2007 Kilbansky prize-winning volume, Coleman's ethic's prompt the articulation of a vision of how scholars might formulate a better position from which to work than notions of White civility have hitherto afforded, and it is this vision that has proved to be the most contested aspect of his book.

A number of factors contribute to the disquiet that one of us, Susan Gingell, feels regarding Coleman's advocacy that scholars adopt a wry, self-conscious civility to replace belief in White civility, a belief often unconsciously held by Canadians who have had unearned advantage conferred on them because of their visible somatic features. Gingell is apprehensive that civility of whatever stripe, due to its association with culturally specific restrained behaviour, may well be alien to peoples from the vibrant outdoor cultures of the global South and Aboriginal North America, peoples who constitute a large and growing part of Canadian society. She is thus uneasy that for all Coleman's recognition of the politics of transfiguration at work in the noises (or what we might think of as noises, to paraphrase Edward Kamau Brathwaite in *History of the Voice*) of enslaved or oppressed peoples of the African diaspora, his

advocacy of civility may be implicated in what South African Canadian Rozena Maart calls "a colonialism of voice" (1990, 10).¹ And Gingell is concerned that advocating civility, no matter how qualified, risks seeming to require of negatively racialized Canadians a polite response to the multiple violences of racism that she fears could put resisters at further disadvantage.

Still, as all the critics contributing to the forum affirm, in tracing the genealogy of White Canadian civility in early Canadian popular literature, and thus making visible discursive processes of positive racialization, Coleman has done admirable service to anti-racist causes. Moreover, the premise of the Author Meets Critics forums is that no one work can hope to offer as strong an account of any object of study or issue as a community of scholars working in consort and thus focusing energy and attention from multiple points of view.

To sketch even the barest outline of the debates about racism and racialization, or to review the literature related to the construction of whiteness, which is the social issue at the centre of Coleman's book, is far beyond what can be accomplished in this introduction, but situating his discussion by brief reference to two scholars' work in order to suggest the importance of *White Civility* may be helpful here. Teun A. van Dijk (1993), a scholar of racism and critical discourse analysis, has identified the widespread operation of the "us"–"them" binary in elite discourses relating to immigration and immigrant groups, and sociologist Yasmin Jiwani (1993, 2005) confirms that the dominant Canadian discourses in the fields of culture and criminology are of a piece with those van Dijk studied, and that these discourses work to pejorate visible minority immigrants. What Coleman demonstrates is that the same discursive operations are at work in the popular writing he studies, and that their prejudicial reach extends to Aboriginal peoples, stigmatizing them as uncivil and outside modernity while circulating ideas of White civility and progress. Thus, the discursive terrain in Canada provides fertile ground for racism to flourish and invites increased surveillance of racialized groups for criminal activity, a situation that may well be one cause of their overrepresentation in prison populations. At the same time, of course, the operations of such discourses prop up whiteness as key to simultaneously normative and privileged ethnicity, and arguably result in the less intense scrutinizing for criminal activity of the White population relative to that of the negatively racialized groups.

The importance of establishing the ways in which this discursive terrain has been historically constituted can be indicated by considering the 2001 circulation of a pamphlet by Member of Parliament Jim Pankiw, the front cover of which reads "Stop Indian Crime." Pankiw was first

elected to the House of Commons as a member of the Reform Party in 1997, was a founding member of the Canadian Reform Conservative Alliance Party and the Democratic Representative Caucus, and, finally, sat as an Independent. Protesting what he argues are anti-egalitarian and unjust sentencing practices, the pamphlet, officially known as a householder, includes the admonition "If you can't do the time, don't do the crime." Moreover, below a back-cover reproduction of the same iconic photograph from the Oka conflict as Fee refers to in her contribution to this forum, Pankiw's pamphlet, distributed post-9/11, calls First Nations activists terrorists. In this and subsequent householders such as "Shouldn't All Children Be Equal" (2002) and "It's Clear Who the Racists Are" (2003), Pankiw creates a classic instance of a White Canadian positioning himself as guardian of national civility while racialized Canadians are derogated as criminally uncivil. If the beliefs that lie behind the generation of such discourse are held and disseminated via publically funded publications by a person twice elected to the House of Commons, first in 1997 and again in 2000 (Government of Canada 2008), then there can be little doubt that the representations of White people's civility and non-White peoples' incivility remain a powerful current in Canadian thought. Thus, we urgently need to understand the historical bases of their constitution so that such discriminatory thinking and the actions flowing from it can be stemmed.

In generating focused discussion of literary scholars of Coleman's book, we followed the process that culminated in the 2006 publication of the first Author Meets Critic forum by *Postcolonial Text*, which addressed J. Edward Chamberlin's *If This Is Your Land Where Are Your Stories? Finding Common Ground*. This time, Didur got things underway by publishing both a review of Coleman's book and a notice of the impending forum in *Chimo*, the news journal of the Canadian Association for Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies. We then invited three critics to participate in a panel with the author held at the 2007 triennial conference of the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies in Vancouver. We asked the three to assess from the viewpoint of their particular scholarly expertise the strengths and weaknesses of Coleman's book. Internationally renowned post-colonial theorist and critic Robert J.C. Young interrogated Coleman's ideas of "Englishness" and "Britishness" by historicizing the terms on which Coleman argues Canadian notions of civility rest, and Young productively troubled Coleman's use of the terms "civility" and "civilization." We regret that Young's other commitments did not allow him to prepare a version of his presentation for this published forum, although Coleman's own contribution to it summarizes his understanding of Young's major points. Margery Fee, a specialist in indigenous literatures, and George Elliott Clarke, a specialist in African-Canadian literature,

rounded out the panel, and the text of their revised presentations, along with Didur's review and Coleman's further thinking on the subject of White civility formulated after the live exchanges, comprise the present published forum.

Didur begins and ends her review of Coleman by arguing the importance of his book for Canadian society. That importance, she suggests, lies in its identifying both forces that condition the degree to which visible-minority immigrants feel themselves to be Canadian, and what is necessary to increase the effectiveness of anti-racist work in this country. Highlighting the difficulty of Coleman's task of illuminating the assumptions constitutive of White Canadian identity, Didur provides a succinct summary of the book's key analytical elements and arguments, the previous scholarship on which it rests, and the structure that serves Coleman's case. Additionally, she hazards the opinion that Coleman's "most important theoretical move . . . in the book" (2008, 5) may be his formulating and urging adoption of a position of *wry* civility to replace the belief in *White* civility. Didur reads Coleman's recommended program of aspiration to vigilant awareness of White implication in Canadian racism and of the contaminated history of White civility, while also being conscious of the pretentiousness of the first part of this program, as both "provocative and "productively paradoxical" (2008, 5–6).

Fee is less sanguine about Coleman's theoretical move than Didur is, and she therefore engages both scholars on the grounds that neither apparently recognizes how the articulation of these aspirations facilitates readers remaining within the frame of Western epistemology. Nevertheless, Fee commends Coleman's investigations into the role that settler discourses play in constructing white Canadian civility and the sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit collateral creation of Euro-Canadians' Others as disorderly and even savage. The first vector of Fee's response unsettles the dominant notion of Canadian justice by indicating what Indigenous academics commenting on this issue have already pointed out: that White law is not synonymous with law itself, whatever White law's hegemonic power may suggest. In this context, she maintains that Coleman's deconstruction of Canadian "fictive ethnicity" (Balibar quoted in Coleman 2006, 7) to show that it rests on the suppression of the history of grossly uncivil violence to Aboriginal peoples is an important foundation for the crucial decolonizing work of building Euro-Canadian understanding that other epistemologies and systems of justice can be at least as effectual and just as *our/their* own.

Fee models an equally important supplemental activity: working to comprehend Aboriginal intellectuals' own writing and speaking, which act in a counter-discursive way out of epistemologies discrepant with

Western ones. The second vector of Fee's response to Coleman's work is thus investigating how three contemporary Indigenous writers, Marie Annharte Baker, Eden Robinson, and Tomson Highway, fruitfully pun on the word "race." The final vector of Fee's engagement with Coleman's work is to extend his line of inquiry into popular representations that exhibit underlying assumptions of white supremacy and progress. This extension entails analyzing Shaney Komulainen's famous photograph of the Oka standoff. Situating the picture as "part of a long tradition of representing racial twins" (Fee 2008, 9), Fee recognizes the result of such visual discourse as equivalent to that of verbal discourse in which Whites and Aboriginals are figured in binaries: White Canadians are constructed as the civilized and law-abiding twin, while Aboriginal Canadians are constructed as barbaric and violent.²

Clarke's contribution to the forum, like Fee's response to Coleman, both lauds Coleman for the important work that *White Civility* does and contends with his advocacy of wry civility, but Clarke also points to the limitations of some of Coleman's readings. Quipping "Why civility?" (2008, 16) in response to Coleman's suggestion of taking up a stance of wry civility, Clarke reads Coleman as hinting that the dismantling of White supremacy requires starting at the top, and follows through on this hint by suggesting the constitutional changes necessary to eliminate the legitimizing of hierarchy in Canada. Calling attention to the absence of discussion in *White Civility* on the ways in which the slavery of both Aboriginal people and Africanadians—or melanin-positive Canadians, as Clarke wryly calls them in order to foreground and counter negative racialization—was a key contributor to white identity formation, Clarke offers from the literature of the period that Coleman investigates a number of examples of how such people were made to serve as the negative pole for the self-vaunting constructions of White Canadians. He also shows how Coleman's use of the work of visible minority writers to counterbalance racist discourse obscures both the literariness of their writing and, because he cites only contemporary examples, the long history of resistant writing in the Canadian context.

Before substantively responding to the commentary of the forum's panelists and audience participants, Coleman provides a summary of his argument in *White Civility* that will be particularly useful to readers of this dossier who have not previously encountered the book. Identifying his leaning toward a Gilroyan politics of fulfillment, Coleman discusses how civility is under attack not only from the margins of society but also from the centres of power, whose most potent agents are, in their post-9/11 panic, blatantly undermining the basis of civil society. He thus goes a good way to explaining why he continues to ask Canadians to live up to their ideals of civility, despite the reservations about this call that he has

heard the scholarly community register. However, further explanation lies in his articulation of “the delusion of neutral consciousness” (Coleman 2008, 14) that he sees undergirding the call to abandon civility in order to open up cognitive space for new epistemologies.

Taking up Robert Young’s call to clarify the connection of *civility* to *civilization* in the argument of *White Civility* leads Coleman to expand on Stuart Hall’s elaboration of Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of chronotopes. Glossing these chronotopes as “the mental maps or images we have of space and time” (Coleman 2008, 17), Coleman’s elaboration is designed to refocus rather than supersede the arguments of *White Civility* by theorizing isochronic imperial time, American- and Canadian-based post-colonial time, diasporic displacement time, and Indigenous concentric time in the service of establishing why a country as culturally diverse as Canada must cultivate awareness of multiple understandings of temporality. The chronotypes upon which he expands are so incommensurable that his argument that all Canadians need to remain alive to the “contingency of our own mental frameworks and conceptual maps” (Coleman 2008, 25) if we are to live respectfully and harmoniously with each other becomes virtually self-evident.

Notes

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1. Gingell’s concern here is informed in particular by Jacques Attali’s theorizing of noise as an expression of marginalities and related to the articulation of new orders, and by Rozena Maart’s (1990, 9) description in *Talk about It!* of her African “heritage of loudness,” and her exposé in the same book of how white feminists attempted to discipline her for what they perceived to be her loud and confrontational manner while participating in discussions of racism.
2. The importance of such analysis as Fee performs here, already suggested by discussion of Pankiw’s deploying of the image, was further vindicated when Mark Reid, editor of the Canadian popular history magazine *The Beaver*, reported in the August–September 2008 issue that photojournalistic experts selected this photograph as one of the ten most influential in shaping the Canadian nation.

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