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Article abstract

This paper revolves around local and experiential facets of the ways in which whiteness is mobilized by both politicians and the mainstream media. Its focus is Manitoba Premier Gary Filmon who, the author argues, simultaneously employs the paradoxical and vacuous meanings of whiteness. The author traces some of the history of current discourse on concepts of whiteness (and the corollary, blackness or non-whiteness), with the aim of elucidating how Filmons success relies on manufacturing an image of himself that revolves around the potent invisibility of whiteness. Approaching the discussion through interpretations of mainstream media representations, the author argues that Filmon mobilizes a strategic image of whiteness that is related to denying the special interests of whiteness and that appeals to humanistic and capitalist sentiments of equality for all, while at the same time constructing whiteness as a universal ideal.

THE INVISIBLE WHITENESS OF BEING
Gary Filmon and the Mainstream Media

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This paper was inspired by a provocative encounter I had with the Honorable Gary Filmon, current Premier of Manitoba. It occurred in 1996, at a meeting of members of the World Commission on Forests and Sustainable Development (ex-heads of state and government officials from all over the world). Filmon gave a speech to this group, and also to presenters from environmental, aboriginal, industrial, and community groups, as well as government representatives from across North America. At the time, I was part of a local environmental youth group whose members were cynical about the Premier's role in sustainable development initiatives. We decided to offer the audience an alternative point of view to what we termed his doublespeak. So, as Filmon began his speech, about half a dozen of us silently held up home-made posters emblazoned with slogans such as: "Hypocrisy," "Save a Tree, Scrap the Filmon White Paper," and "Protect Manitoba's parks from Gary Filmon." In one sweeping verbal gesture, Filmon shut down our brief display of dissent: "These extremists clearly don't believe in sustainable development," he said. He was supported by the applause of the majority of the business people and industrialists in the room.

However, my encounter did not end in the meeting room. Later, I ended up in an elevator alongside none other than Filmon himself. Unable to maintain silence, I introduced myself as one of the "people holding up signs during his speech." I expected no more than a polite brush-off. I was surprised that, instead, Filmon proceeded to argue petulantly with me. I suggested that it might be better to continue our discussion in an environment more conducive to debate, and asked if our group could make an appointment with him or his Minister of Environment. His response was "Go ahead and try."

His lack of interest in debate and dissent, both at the conference and in the elevator, indicated a remarkable level of security in his own right to control situations of discourse. I sensed that much of the sweeping power behind Filmon's few choice words had to do with how he mobilized whiteness and its attendant notions of unstated agreement and assumed, unreflective consensus. I lay no claim to disinterested inquiry; this is as much a narrative as a research paper. Based on my experiences and the public record, I argue that Filmon simultaneously deploys the paradoxical meanings and vacuousness of whiteness. This paper, then, revolves around the local and experiential facets of the ways in which whiteness is mobilized by both politicians and the mainstream media to bolster popular compliance with mainstream agendas.

For me, growing up immersed in Euro-derivative traditions, the mythology of whiteness was bound up in Enlightenment ideas of purity, virginity,

innocence, and normality. But as I use it here, whiteness is part of the discourse on identity politics. It refers to the unnamed, dominant group in the current debate about (post) identity politics. It is the normative conceptual standard against which difference is measured, and yet constructions of whiteness rely on the attendant concept of blackness for their meanings (see for example hooks 1992). Despite contemporary calls for its racialization (e.g. Frankenberg 1993), whiteness remains an inchoate concept, identified in the mainstream largely by what it is not: black, marginal, minority, special interest. In a maddening irony, the fundamental power of whiteness comes from the paradoxical specificity of its roots in the history of Euro-derivative Western dominance and its ubiquity, normality, and tactically invisible essence (as discussed by Greenhill 1994). Something that is at once hegemonic and absent is hard to resist.

In the domains of North American political discourse, whiteness is about more than simply colour, race, or ethnicity. Whiteness becomes the shorthand configuration of an entire (dis)embodied set of characteristics which are supposed, both in the margins and the mainstream, and whether subconsciously or consciously, to describe the dominant class. And as Cohen's work in this volume suggests, the caveat is that one does not have to be "white" to be white. The categorization is based on perception and encoded cultural behaviours, not necessarily on physical or material traits. In keeping with this characterization of whiteness, I argue for the linkage of masculine identity to this discussion of whiteness. Although I certainly do not place myself as a "white woman" outside the domain and deployment of whiteness, I locate Filmon's constructions of gender, his masculinized mobilizations of identity, among the manifestations of his whiteness. One of the main objectives of this paper is to get at the complexities that these links engender, the criss-crossing paths of race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, and other roles — all the contexts in which, consciously or not, Filmon engages whiteness to silence dissent.

In the mainstream media's popular imagination, Gary Filmon has epitomised the quintessential ideal, average Manitoban. He is seen as socio-economically upper-middle class, white, male, masculine, family-oriented, Protestant, hard-working, business-minded, small-town, mild-mannered, moderate, respected, but never special. In the commonly-idealised Prairie identity, these are powerful traits. University of Manitoba political scientist Paul Thomas says in a Canadian Press piece: "Manitoba is in the middle, both in a geographic sense and in a political culture sense. We've always taken a more moderate view about free enterprise and government intervention in the economy" (Edmonds 1995: A4).

Many mainstream media articles about Filmon thus focus on reducing the political power-holder to a more human, biographical state. The first revelation for me was that, WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) image notwithstanding, Filmon's ethnic background is mostly Ukrainian, Polish, and

Romanian. Journalist Geoffrey York tells of how, like many an immigrant to "British North America," Filmon's father "anglicized" the family name from Filimon when he emigrated westward to Canada (York 1988: A10). Although by most definitions Filmon still qualifies as white, this Eastern European background certainly destabilizes the notion that he is pure white — that is, British. This distinction very much makes a difference in identity constructions where every shade away from "pure white" becomes in some way "coloured." Folks of British origin are rarely considered in any way "ethnic" (Greenhill 1994).

Yet Filmon himself tries to efface the reality of his own difference. In public discourse, he explicitly mobilizes the "we" of whiteness: "[The Commonwealth] still represents something good in the world... Our heritage is the British parliamentary system of government" (Rollason 1996: A5). The photograph accompanying the newspaper article in which this quotation appears depicts Filmon with several other men dressed as voyageurs in a canoe, preparing to land at the legislative dock on the Assiniboine River. Besides revealing an element of Filmon's identity politics, the slant of this article multivocally portrays the neo-humanistic, neo-imperialist characteristics of whiteness in what is, at least officially, a multi-cultural, antiracist epoch.

In another article, Filmon again attempts to link his public persona to notions of dominanace and normality. The headline reads: "'Have-not' label irks Filmon" (Benham 1989: 5). With great alacrity, Filmon takes issue with one of his political opponent's statements that Manitoba is a "have-not" province. In an uncharacteristic display of emotion, Filmon lashed out against the implication that his province is disadvantaged: "Manitoba has never been a have-not province to me. It has always been a province of opportunity" (Benham 1989: 5).

In a second revelation, linked intimately to the first, I discovered that Filmon grew up in a basically working-class household. Like his non-English ethnic roots, this flies in the face of popular wisdom about who Gary Filmon is. The premier has successfully left his roots behind, at least in reference to his political persona. Again, York writes:

> Gary Albert Filmon... was born and raised in the working-class neighbourhoods of north-end Winnipeg... The elder Filmon worked first on a farm near Neepawa in western Manitoba, then found a job as a presser in a Winnipeg garment factory. His mother, Anastasia Doskocz, the daughter of Ukrainian immigrants, met her future husband when she took a sewing job in the same garment factory... Money was never plentiful, and from an early age he scrambled for part-time jobs (York 1989: A10).

Although this particular article develops a rags-to-riches, promise-of-capitalist-enterprise success story, in another, Filmon resists the possibility that his working class roots remove him from the white mainstream, saying: "I never thought of myself as poor or underprivileged in any respect"

(Comeau 1988: 49). Perhaps "enigmatic Filmon" does not "bare [his] soul to Manitobans" (Comeau 1988: 49) for some very political reasons. Control does not reside with the non-white. Where is the power in identifying with the margins?

Yet a different, "ethnic," working-class past does not necessarily or directly connote political location. Margaret Thatcher and Brian Mulroney — both, like Filmon, conservative politicians — made explicit, at least in their earlier days in politics, their ascendence to leadership through good, capitalist, pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps hard work. Filmon does not. The reason why he eschews this route no doubt lies partly in the prairie identity referred to above, which values personal moderation over individual excellence. But it can also be traced to the backlash against the "special interest groups" of identity politics. Thus Filmon engages in the politics of identity-management. A couple of years prior to a local newspaper's description of "Teflon" Filmon's strategy of low-profile politicking (Russell 1990: 7), *The Globe and Mail*'s Geoffrey York wrote:

> Gary Filmon, the premier-designate of Manitoba, is the enigma of Manitoba politics... Manitobans are uncertain who Gary Filmon really is. Many assume he is the product of a middle-class English-Canadian household, but in fact he is the son of a Ukrainian mother and a Polish-Romanian father who worked in a garment factory (York 1988: A10).

Like other identities built on homogenizing images, Filmon's inconsistencies within whiteness are elucidated in troped-out power plays between media and government. Filmon's whiteness is not monolithic, as much as he might like it to be.

In a third revelation, I found that mobilizations of masculinity play a significant role in Filmon's white identity. Describing a sort of initiation-rite progression within the hyper-masculine, competitive, aggressive, public world of politics, media accounts of Filmon's career move from images of weakness and inexperience to positions of strength and control. Perhaps not surprisingly, in non-symmetrical but relevant relation to many mainstream press pieces which focus on women politicians' fashion savvy, several biographical articles see fit to comment on Filmon's athletic ability and physical strength. Pauline Comeau's *Winnipeg Free Press* piece "Tory Turmoil" reads:

> [W]hile high marks may have come easily to him, sports — basketball, and rugby in particular — were tougher to conquer. "I remember him as eager to learn, and solid — a team player, but not a gifted athlete," Pruden, an admitted NDP supporter and a teacher at TecVoc High School [where Filmon was a student], says (1988: 49).

In a more subtle reference, perhaps paralleling the attention paid to women politicians' voice qualities, an article in the same newspaper quotes a whining

Filmon fighting off internal dissent from fellow Tories. The headline reads "Quit sniping at me, Filmon tells Tories" (Graham 1985: A10).

More recently, however, I have noticed something of an about-face. In an albeit fairly partisan piece in *Manitoba Business*, Filmon becomes the "Tory Iron Man" (anon. 1994: 13). Similarly, in a mainstream media play on partisan differences, Filmon is accused of being "a little coward" by opposition party member Stan Struthers. Qualifying comments soon dampen this affront, however, as the indictment of Filmon's recreant tendencies becomes "NDP grandstanding" and "anarchy in the house" (Samyn 1996: A1). These remarks, in the resolutely masculine arena of politics and in the chronology of Filmon's career as Manitoba Premier, place him in a position of (dis)located whiteness which privileges masculine identity and its socially-constructed traits.

Filmon's power lies in disembodiment. Here, what I — but certainly not the liberal, mainstream media — would name as whiteness is made overt. The politician's identity formation, like the concept of whiteness itself, spreads out as something known but invisible, normative but unstated, against which others are measured. And certainly, mainstream media accounts maintain a common representational thread around Filmon's mysteriousness. Several articles and letters in the *Winnipeg Free Press* and *The Globe and Mail* between 1988 and 1991 and 1994 and 1995 address Filmon as an enigma. In one dubbed "Filmon benefits from a low profile," political scientist and former Winnipeg city councillor William Neville remarks on the fact that, for the Premier, "relative invisibility" is a plus: "At a time when most politicians and governments are deeply unpopular and on the ropes, just to stay out of trouble is an achievement... Now, it seems it's 'that government governs best, governs least visibly'" (Russell 1990: 7).

Clearly, though, Filmon is not uniquely responsible for constructions of whiteness he mobilizes or comprises. He is also a product of the cultural and political environment within which he operates and over which he has some, but not ultimate, control. In examining whiteness, it is in part this limited control which gives access to the meanings of white and non-white. Politics, and its cultural politics, are all about image, style over substance. In my imaginings about how whiteness is mobilized by Gary Filmon, what become most clear to me are the powerful ways in which an entire system of politics turns away from polysemous meanings in favour of tenuous, black-and-white structural territories demarcated by stereotypes, power games, and slick overtures to liberal humanism. Yet, most disturbing for me are the ways in which dominant groups and individuals have troped identity politics to use against "us" — the folks who are most obviously subjected to political control. Identity politics was supposed to be a way to embody the dominant "they," to mark whiteness as a category, not to further marginalize the already marginal.

And so, although even mainstream media accounts hint at hidden pasts — Filmon as wimpy nerd, Filmon as immigrant, and Filmon as working class

— Gary Filmon emerges from my research as the epitome of the stereotypical able-bodied, upper middle class, white, masculine male. When he mobilizes these identities, he chooses the safety and totalizing simplicity of whiteness over the riddled and unsure terrain of difference. He relies on the unspoken power of whiteness to silence dissent, because he can still afford to be disembodied, and because in the current balance of public power, it works.

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