

# OTHER SOLITUDES

CANADIAN  
MULTICULTURAL  
FICTIONS

EDITED BY  
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Toronto  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS  
1990

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the Department of the Secretary of State, Multiculturalism and the Canadian Publishing Foundation for their assistance in funding this volume.

For their invaluable assistance, we would also like to thank the Honourable Gerry Weiner, Minister of State, Multiculturalism and Citizenship; Edward Richmond, QC; Richard Teleky, our editor at the press.

Marion Richmond  
Linda Hutcheon

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LINDA HUTCHEON

Title

## Introduction

## I— 'A Spell of Language':

## Introducing Other Solitudes

'But it was a spell of language that brought Nicholas here, arriving in Canada without a passport in 1914, a great journey made in silence. Hanging under the bridge, he describes the adventure to himself, just as he was told a fairy tale of Upper America by those who returned to the Macedonian villages ...'

Michael Ondaatje, 'The Bridge'

[The initial purpose of *Other Solitudes* was to break through what one commentator has called 'the protective shell of Canadian-style tolerance: acceptance without concern'.<sup>1</sup> Its articulation of *concern*—through questions about multicultural identity posed to and by writers of fiction—explores both the *lived* experience and the *literary* expression of multiculturalism in Canada at this particular historical moment.] For this reason you will find here both fiction and interviews. The conversations frequently address crucial issues, such as racism and cultural confusions and tensions, in a direct, even confrontational manner, and no attempt has been made either to direct or to censor them. The stories raise similar issues, but they also clearly point to the important role played by the images we create and the stories we tell in our sense of identity and self-worth. In Himani Bannerji's story 'The Other Family', a young East Indian child's drawing of a clichéd, textbook 'Canadian' family provokes this response:

Listen, said the mother, this is not your family. I, you and your father are dark-skinned, dark-haired. I don't have a blond wig hidden in my closet, my eyes are black, not blue, and your father's beard is black, not red, and you, do you have a white skin, a button nose with freckles, blue eyes and blond hair tied into a pony tail? You said you drew our family. This is not it, is it?

The power of such images and stories is what this collection explores.

As two women with manifestly 'Anglo' marital surnames that mask Eastern European/Jewish and Italian backgrounds, we have deliberately entitled this book *Other Solitudes* in order to recall and revise

Hugh MacLennan's earlier designation of Canada as 'two solitudes'. In 1945, perhaps, French and English were still the dominant ethnocultural groups in Canada; certainly the only people who could contest their historical claim to founding status were the indigenous native populations. Almost half a century later, however, the multiracial, pluri-ethnic nature of Canada is an undeniable reality. And one of the consequences of this change is that MacLennan's idealistic optimism has to be reconsidered, for his title alluded to a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke: 'Love consists in this / that two solitudes protect, / and touch, and greet each other'. With the cultural diversity that twentieth-century immigration has brought to Canada have come both cultural riches and social tensions that move far beyond those of bilingualism and biculturalism. When, on 12 July 1988, the House of Commons passed Bill C-93, 'An Act for the preservation and enhancement of multiculturalism in Canada', it enshrined both an ideal and an ideology. This book investigates the intersection of the tensions and the riches, the ideal and the ideology.

In using the term 'multicultural' in our subtitle, we rather pointedly avoid the term 'ethnic'. The two historical strands that weave the meaning of the latter are as problematic for us as for many others, as shown in this book by the conversations between Frank Paci and Joseph Pivato and between Mordecai Richler and Marlene Kadar. The first strand—from the Greek root *ethnos*, meaning 'nation' or 'people'—should suggest that *all* Canadians are ethnic, including French and British; the fact that the word is *not* so used points to a hierarchy of social and cultural privilege that this collection wants to challenge. The second strand of meaning is derived from usage: whether in its earlier associations with 'pagan' and 'heathen' or in its more recent ones with 'foreign', the word 'ethnic' always has to do with the social positioning of the 'other', and is thus never free of relations of power and value. Yet these are the very issues raised by the structure of this book, as well as by the individual voices within it.

In selecting the writers and interviewers as well as the works to be included, we were guided by a number of both choices and inherent limitations. The latter are perhaps obvious: of the great number of ethnocultural and language groups that have active writers residing and working in Canada, we could include only a small fraction. The authors included here have their roots in Czechoslovakia, Barbados, Russia, Japan, Iceland-Ireland, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Chile, Italy, Greece, India, the Ukraine, Trinidad, Turkey, and China.

Some have their primary social and cultural roots in religious groupings, especially Jewish and Mennonite. The fact that almost half the writers are members of what are now called 'visible minorities' marks a significant new development in Canadian immigration patterns. The interviewers' backgrounds are similarly diverse: Polish, Hungarian, Turkish-East European, Italian, Mennonite, Scots-Irish, Indian, British, Czech, Ukrainian, Scots-Indian, Finnish, and Jewish. Despite this variety, the list is obviously not complete. Some groups are not represented at all, and others have multiple representation. There are, for instance, three West Indian writers because important differences of gender, race, age, and time of arrival in Canada seemed worth exploring in one sample group, even if we could not do so for all. There are also a number of Jewish writers—again, of differing ages and backgrounds—representing the diversity within the cultural group that has produced so many Canadian writers, in both the past and the present. The most obvious omission might well be someone originally from the United States, but the political and cultural ambiguities of Canada's relations with her powerful southern neighbour are the topic of conversation in over half the interviews here.

Following these interviews and stories, a section entitled 'The First and Founding Nations Respond' adds another layer of historical complexity to the various questions raised. Robertson Davies' essentially positive, perhaps complacent, faith in the notion of something 'Canadian' at the heart of multiculturalism is challenged by what Jacques Godbout sees as overshadowing both: 'I am still fighting for the presence of the French language,' he says. The first voice, that of native playwright Tomson Highway, poses new questions and suggests interesting, perhaps unexpected, resolutions which underline the historical fact that what we now call Canada has always been multicultural, that it has always negotiated the space between social tension and cultural richness.

Within the restrictions of availability and of the necessity of selection, then, we have attempted to present a range of ages and generations, as well as races and ethnicities, in both authors and interviewers. Approximately half are Canadian-born; half have immigrated to Canada as either children or adults. We have selected a mixture of well-known, 'mainstream' writers and younger or less familiar ones, and have ordered them by chronological age. Some interviews are very personal, while others are didactic, teaching us about the more public experience of multiculturalism; some conversations are literary in their emphasis, while others are more social,

even sociological. This range could not have been planned, but the variety should ensure that all readers find something of interest here. We have not removed the unexpected and often ironic points of unintended dialogue: at one point, Frank Paci asks how Michael Ondaatje and Joy Kogawa feel about their status as 'other', for instance, and elsewhere in the book you can indeed read how they do feel; Matt Cohen asks where the Greek, Italian, or West Indian writers of Canadian cities are—and one answer is: on these pages.

One point must be emphasized, however: this book is an exploration of the meeting-ground of experience and literary expression in individual writers. These writers are not necessarily meant to speak for any group as a whole; indeed, as several interviews show, both the individuals and the groups in question might well reject such a role, however straightforward it may seem. Each writer has a special agenda; each is working out his or her relations with a particular group and with the nation in individual ways. Having said that, I should add that there is also a sense in which their very appearance in this volume unavoidably grants them all representative roles. Yet the fiction and the conversations you will read show that even writers within the same racial or ethnic grouping often disagree on the function or success of multiculturalism as both policy and reality. Nevertheless, some—such as Paul Yee and Himani Bannerji—clearly feel they want to speak *to*, if not *for*, a particular cultural community. Others, however—such as Yeshim Ternar, Mordecai Richler, and Michael Ondaatje—seem to see their audience as much broader, perhaps because of a fear of parochialism or of becoming a 'professional immigrant'. In his story 'Swimming Lessons', Rohinton Mistry uses gentle but pointed irony to express his fears about this last danger. As the protagonist's parents in India read his first published stories, we are told:

The last story they liked best of all because it had the most in it about Canada . . . and Father said if he continues to write about such things he will become popular because I am sure they are interested there in reading about life through the eyes of an immigrant, it provides a different viewpoint; the only danger is if he changes and becomes so much like them that he will write like one of them and lose the important difference.

Multiculturalism, for all the extremes of 'hype' and cynicism, is real and immediate for Canadians. As many others have noted, this is not just because most of us can quite easily trace our origins or perhaps

even our arrival from elsewhere. Nor is it simply because the media are quick to present racial and ethnic tensions or to show us Chinese, Tamil, Polish, or Armenian Canadians responding to events in their homelands on the streets of Canada. The multiracial and multi-ethnic nature of this country is made real to us—is written into our consciousness of what it means to be Canadian—by Canadian writers. To read their writing here in a multicultural context is not to homogenize differences, nor to forget that the French and British are themselves 'ethnic' and different. It is to recognize that literature depends on the whole of culture, of history and social traditions, without reducing diversity to ethnocultural enclaves. It is, in the end, to help ourselves understand that there are ways of seeing the world, and of writing in and about it, that may be different from our own ways—whatever they might be—and valuable because of that difference. Dutch Canadian novelist Aritha Van Herk evokes well the challenges not only of writing in a multicultural context but of reading as well:

Imagine a country as this country is, peopled by characters who have abandoned their setting and who seek to plot their own story in a new way. They choose to displace themselves, to surrender the familiar. . . . Curiously enough, because they make the choices, they are happy, if not always satisfied with their story, and the effects of displacement only begin to appear in the children or grandchildren. Some people would say that it is only a matter of adapting to a new environment, or adjusting to custom, of learning a language. I maintain that it is much more profound, a displacement so far-reaching that it only vanishes after several generations. At least it was for me. I learned that the world was fiction and fiction was refuge.<sup>2</sup>

## II—The Dilemmas of Diversity

' . . . a Canadian is a hyphen . . . we're diplomats by birth.'

Joy Kogawa, in conversation with Magdalene Redekop

There is no obvious place to start any investigation of the ethnocultural diversity that has created what we call 'multiculturalism' in Canada today—or, indeed, what we call 'Canada' today. The temptation is to resort to lists: for example, lists of ethnicities, races, or religions represented in the country. The latter alone would yield: Christian (in all its various forms), Jewish, Rastafarian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh . . . But could even this list ever be exhaustive? And would it account for the cultural differences among Mennonites,

Hutterites, Doukhobors, and other Christian-based social groupings? Even listing by the broader category of ethnicity—in the sense of shared cultural, linguistic, racial, national, or religious background—risks oversimplifying. For example, as many have pointed out, both the census category of ‘British’ and the politically loaded, colloquial ‘WASP’ mask significant differences: Celtic vs. English, types of Protestantism, historical enmities. Could we even generalize by local region? Is the story of the Canadian West really the tale of Ukrainian immigrants as told by fiction writers such as Maara Haas, Myrna Kostash, and, before them, Vera Lysenko and Illya Kiriak? If so, what do we do with Laura Goodman Salverson’s *The Viking Heart*, Adele Wiseman’s *The Sacrifice*, or even Margaret Laurence’s Scottish/Métis Manawaka stories?

I have deliberately shifted ground here from history to novels, because the purpose of this collection of fiction and conversations is to investigate not only how multiculturalism is *lived* but how it is *written into* Canadian life. The cultural richness that immigration has brought to this country has changed forever our concept of what constitutes ‘Canadian literature’. Let me take just one example, but a typical one: to talk of South Asian writing in Canada today is to talk of writers like Himani Bannerji, Rohinton Mistry, Michael Ondaatje, and Neil Bissoondath—who all appear in this volume—but there are other writers whose names you may not yet know as well, but who are writing and publishing in Canada: Krisantha Sri Bhaggiyadatta, Rienzi Crusz, Cyril Dabydeen, Lakshmi Gill, Reshart Gool, Suniti Namjoshi, Uma Parameswaran, Asoka Weerasinghe, S. Padmanab, and many others. What even this partial listing hides, however, is that South Asian writers come from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Afghanistan, the Maldives Islands—often via East or South Africa, the West Indies, Guyana, Fiji, Mauritius, or the Malay Peninsula, not to mention Europe and elsewhere in North America. This historical and cultural complexity is emblematic of the difficulties facing any attempt to generalize about the consequences of multiculturalism for any group of writers.

The difficulties do not stop there, however. Both the lived experience and the literary impact of multiculturalism in Canada vary according to an intricate set of variables in the lives of both authors and the characters they create: the time and conditions of immigration, age, gender, class, religion, race. Even education can be a factor: not all immigrants feel as superior to Canadians as does Josef Skvorecky’s protagonist in *The Engineer of Human Souls*. And, as is

seen in the stories by Joy Kogawa and Rohinton Mistry, and in the conversations between Frank Paci and Joseph Pivato or Janice Kulyk Keefer and Jars Balan, time and place of education can make for rifts between family generations that are not easily bridged, that create what Mordecai Richler in *The Street* calls ‘the familiar and agonizing process of alienation between immigrant parents and Canadian-born children’. It seems to make a difference, too, if one has emigrated by free choice or through economic or political necessity. Sometimes, an immigrant such as Nicholas Temelcoff in Ondaatje’s ‘The Bridge’ finds Canada a refuge, however difficult the uprooting; even more frequently, however, as the story by Austin Clarke shows, what immigrants have found upon arrival has not been an easy life, for some not even an improved one, at least in material terms. Learning a new language, as Marilú Mallet’s story illustrates, is often part of the difficulty: being able to speak English or French is potentially a sign of belonging. Yeshim Ternar’s ‘Ajax là-bas’ addresses the blocks to that sense of belonging: ‘We come here to speak like them, she thinks; but it will be a long time before they let us practice.’ For writers language is bound to be a central issue, as both Rudy Wiebe and Josef Skvorecky explore in very different ways in the interviews here. And for women (even beyond their specific social groups), the old structures of patriarchal society seem to die hard, even in the New World, even at the end of the twentieth century. The stories in this book by Katherine Vlassie, Paul Yee, Janice Kulyk Keefer, Neil Bissoondath, and W.D. Valgardson all deal with various gender-related problems, as does the conversation between Himani Bannerji and Arun Mukherjee.

The other thing that resists change, as the fiction and interviews here sadly show, is that the single most significant factor in the response to multiculturalism in Canada today appears to be race. It would be naïve to think that the various waves of European immigration did not create social tensions in Canada: the very existence of abusive terms such as ‘wop’ or ‘bohunk’ or ‘kraut’ bears witness to the contrary. Not even those groups that seemed to fit Canada’s unofficial self-image as a northern nation (‘the true north strong and free’)—such as the Scandinavians and Germans—have escaped. Canada does not have an unblemished past with regard to racism, but with increasing numbers of immigrants who, as Jacques Godbout here puts it, are ‘visibly different, have different religions, different attitudes toward women’ and different political histories, racism is once again a concern that cannot be ignored. The often subtle signs

of social or employment discrimination today are explored in Austin Clarke's 'Canadian Experience' and in the Mistry/Novak and Ternar/Leith dialogues. But Mordecai Richler's selection from *The Street* recalls that even wartime Canada was already seen as a place that was 'flawed and hostile' to Jews, and the interviews with Paul Yee and Austin Clarke remind us of a longer history of racism in this country, a history whose colonial legacy is further investigated in the Bannerji/Mukherjee and Bissoondath/Srivastava conversations. The prejudice may be subtle or blatant, but few non-white — or Jewish — writers will deny that it can exist, masked behind the rhetoric of tolerance that is an intrinsic part of multiculturalism.

Yet not only white Canadians are guilty of this. Rohinton Mistry talks to Dagmar Novak about the racism he has found in India; Magdalene Redekop tells Joy Kogawa of finding the same in Japan. And, as Yeshim Ternar explains, racism is often hard to pinpoint: 'But what is prejudice, and what is curiosity, and what is tactless questioning?' she asks. And, both Paul Yee and Austin Clarke ask, what is racist stereotyping? And on what grounds does such thinking become exclusive, alienating those of other races and religions? asks Matt Cohen's story 'Racial Memories'. In his novella *Intelligence*, Lebanese Canadian writer Marwan Hassan's protagonist expresses his irritation at being asked why the West, especially its press, does not see Arabs in a positive light: 'I long ago gave up trying to understand why Arabs are disliked. . . . The average Canadian has never even so much as met one of us, there are too few of us.'<sup>3</sup> In a recent article, Neil Bissoondath puts such Canadian racial intolerance in context: 'racism is as Canadian as maple syrup,' he writes, but 'it is also as American as apple pie, as French as croissants, as Jamaican as ackee, as Indian as aloo, as Chinese as chow mein.'<sup>4</sup> His story 'Dancing' deals with what might be called 'reverse racism' — of blacks against whites — and it should likely be read in the light of the twist that Bissoondath is not black himself, but of Indian descent.

Racism extends not only to relatively new arrivals to Canada but to those who were here well before any European colonizers; yet this is something that Canada's idealistic multicultural ideology has not really addressed. Canada is not a new country; it is old, in both physical and cultural terms; it has been lived in by our native peoples for longer than it has been colonized. Yet our Euro-centric concepts of history more often than not fail to note this fact and thus condemn to silence the past of the land and its peoples. And for those silenced by this Euro-centrism, the cultural stakes are high. Canadian novelist

and playwright George Ryga often commented that in the Alberta in which he grew up, Ukrainians and natives were considered equally inferior.<sup>5</sup> Métis writer Maria Campbell has said that she didn't understand her own people's history of injustice until she had read about the Mennonite and other communities' histories.<sup>6</sup> Rudy Wiebe reverses this, claiming that his Mennonite background has helped him understand the dispossession and displacement of native peoples.

I do not mean to suggest either that all Canadians are racist or that the response to being non-white in Canada is a single, monolithic one. Nor is race the only factor, especially for writers, for whom language always plays such a crucial role. This is the case not only for those who must learn English or French, as we have seen, but also for those who speak either as their native tongue. Austin Clarke's novel *The Bigger Light* illustrates, through its portrayal of a Barbadian couple in Toronto, the difficulties of generalizing: the husband, aware that language is power and embarrassed by his West Indian-ness, seeks a new way to speak; his wife too represses her accent and idiom at work, but revels in them when she is with Island friends. For her, they do not represent all that was left behind; rather, they become the symbol of the living link with that past. This split response, of course, may well be typical of the kind of tension felt by any immigrants to any new place. Doubleness, as many commentators have pointed out, is the essence of the immigrant experience. Caught between two worlds, the immigrant negotiates a new social space; caught between two cultures and often languages, the writer negotiates a new literary space. That this can be a difficult process is perhaps obvious; that it is shared by our native people is perhaps less so. Meeks Uniuqsaraq, an Inuit high-school student, writes: 'Language is one of our most important traditions; if we lose our language to French and English, we lose ourselves.'<sup>7</sup>

But we should not lose sight of the positive possibilities. In Suwanda Sugunasiri's words, 'Canadian literature is an ocean fed by many a river in which flow the tears and joys of our 70 or so cultural groups,'<sup>8</sup> and the merging of those rivers has not left any of the waters unchanged. When a Toronto Jewish photographer like Robert Minden and a Malaysian/Anglo immigrant poet like Daphne Marlatt choose to represent in images and words a Japanese Canadian fishing town, the result is *Steveston* — a book that could be called postmodern, or even post-colonial. I introduce those two 'post-' words here because the literary products of Canada's multicultural ideology can

be seen to partake of both cultural phenomena. Their common valuing of the 'different' and what has been considered marginal over what is deemed central has marked a major shift in cultural thinking; their common use of rhetorical strategies such as irony and allegory—in order to confront dominant literary forms and traditions—has marked much Canadian writing. History leaves its mark on our literature; it always has.

### III—*Canadian History as Multicultural*

'You come telling me you going to Canada as a' immigrant? To be a stranger? Where Canada is? What is Canada?'

West Indian father to son, in Austin Clarke's 'Canadian Experience'

The history of Canada, as it was taught to most of us, is the history of immigration. It also happens to be the history of European colonialism and of native displacement and cultural erasure: whether, as Susanna Moodie felt, emigration from Britain in the last century was a 'matter of necessity, not of choice'—'an act of severe duty'—or whether it marked the imperial usurpation of lands already occupied depends on whose history is being written—and read. Whichever way the story is told, what we today call 'multiculturalism' figures prominently: all Canadians of other than native stock are originally immigrants from somewhere, and even the native peoples are and were plural—in other words, multicultural. Whether the Europeans came as explorers, fishermen, missionaries, fur traders, or homesteaders, they came from elsewhere. The Canadian West, for example, was settled by a mixture of British, American, German, Scandinavian, Russian, Polish, and, especially, Ukrainian immigrants, who brought with them not only different languages and customs, but different religions. According to Canadian geographer Cole Harris's 'archipelago' theory of Canadian regionalism,<sup>9</sup> the historical settlement pattern—'island by island, across the country—created socially and culturally disparate groupings that were internally linked by networks of local and kinship traditions. Our country, in other words, was set up—historically and demographically—in such a way that the eventual formulation of something like multiculturalism might seem to have been inevitable. While many immigrants have thought of Canada as a 'new' society in a New World—or in what today one might call, along with Skvorecky's narrator in *The Engineer of Human Souls*, a 'country of cities with no past'—the multicultural history of Canada is not a recent one. And the traces of that longer

history can be seen literally in the marks left by many immigrants on the face of the cities and farms where they lived and worked.

The Loyalist migration following American independence in the last quarter of the eighteenth century had injected a rich racial and ethnic mix into early Canadian society: Highland Scots, French Huguenots, Swiss Germans, Dutch, Joseph Brant's natives, black Loyalists. African blacks had, of course, arrived in Canada as early as the beginning of the seventeenth century—as slaves at Louisbourg and Halifax auctions—and in the mid-1800s, the Underground Railroad brought still others. Earlier in that century, the Irish famine, the unemployment following the Napoleonic wars, and the Scottish enclosure laws had already provided more immigrants and perhaps entrenched the image of Canada as a refuge for what Hugh MacLennan once somewhat disparagingly called 'the flotsam and jetsam of defeated racial and political groups'.<sup>10</sup> Europeans left homeless by this century's wars have found Canada a safe haven, as have other victims of foreign political strife: Hungarians, Czechs, Ugandan Asians, Haitians, Lebanese, Tamils, Chileans, Vietnamese. For still others, Canada—though often a second choice to the United States—has seemed to offer economic opportunities for a better life: Italians, Portuguese, Greeks, Koreans, Chinese, South Asians, West Indians. As various stories in this book suggest by their settings, many (though by no means all) settled in Canada's largest cities—Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver, Winnipeg.

While the view of Canada as a tolerant, welcoming nation is to some extent valid, the fiction and dialogues here suggest that it must not be accepted without acknowledging an equally compelling history of intolerance: from the extermination of the Beothuk in Newfoundland to the restriction of the other native peoples to reserves; from the deportation of the Acadians to the cultural denigration of French Canada in Lord Durham's Report; from the head tax collected only on Chinese immigrants to the displacement and internment of all Japanese Canadians during the last war; from the deportation of the sick, poor, unemployed, or politically radical in the first decades of this century to the refusal to accept European Jews before the Holocaust. In 1988 the Canadian government did grant \$300-million compensation to the interned Japanese Canadians, but the Chinese National Council is still seeking redress for the injustice of both the head tax and the Chinese Immigration (Exclusion) Act that for twenty-four years represented the only such racially and nationally specific exclusion in Canadian law.

There is another fear felt by many Canadians who are not of French or English heritage, a fear that seems to contradict this historical memory of prejudice based on difference: this is the fear of assimilation. The tension between wanting to belong to the new society and yet wanting to retain the culture of the old one obviously varies from person to person in intensity and emotional weight. But it is rarely absent. Himani Bannerji, both in conversation with Arun Mukherjee and in her story 'The Other Family', voices her concern that the next generation (by choice or by indoctrination) may not want to retain the cultural links with the past. As Skvorecky ironically puts it, they would become 'Anglo-Saxons with names like Bellissimmo, Hakim, Svensson'. Paci's Italian-born boys in 'The Stone Garden' have differing memories of an Italy now left behind. Yet the tensions exist there too, as they try to exclude from their Italian group a Scottish Canadian girl—as much for reasons of ethnicity as because she is female. Yet other writers, as Joy Kogawa reveals at the end of her talk with Magdalene Redekop, feel that the mixing of races and ethnicities—both in general cultural terms and through intermarriage—is part of the Canadian identity and need not be deplored. Indeed, she may be demographically correct: Statistics Canada reports that, according to the 1986 census, 28 per cent of Canadians are descended from more than one ethnic group.

Despite the fact that fully 100 per cent of non-native Canadians are immigrants or from immigrant backgrounds, a CBC television report stated that 64 per cent of those polled by Environics in 1988 felt that too many immigrants were being allowed into Canada. What can this discrepancy mean? Historical amnesia might account for some part, but ethnocentrism and xenophobia cannot be discounted, even in a country that, since 1971, has been officially multicultural.

#### IV—Multicultural Policy and its Discontents

'Canadians have begun to come into their own—no longer colonial, no longer defined in negatives only, no longer a huge blank on the map of humanity, but empowered, mature, and free at last to aspire to that multiracial democracy that a few of our number once glimpsed in dreams of the future.'

William Kilbourn<sup>11</sup>

One of those who 'glimpsed' the possibilities of a different Canada was Pierre Elliott Trudeau. For years, bilingualism and biculturalism carried the weight of defining what 'Canadian' meant (thanks to a

silent ignoring of the First Nations). In 1970 the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism offered for general consideration what, in the fourth volume of its report, it called *The Cultural Contribution of the Other Ethnic Groups*, and in 1971 Trudeau acknowledged that contribution in the form of a policy statement about Canada's multicultural identity. The subsequent decades have seen attempts, not always happy, to define how much difference can actually be accommodated within a federal system of centralized cultural and political authority. The passing of Bill C-93, the 'Act for the preservation and enhancement of multiculturalism in Canada', in 1988 enshrined in law the recognition and promotion of cultural and racial diversity that is intended to result in a mutually enriching meeting of cultures. Even if some people remain unconvinced that this act is not just paying lip-service to an undeniable social fact, or concealing assimilationist impulses behind a mask of tolerance, few would deny that its ideal is a worthy one.

The fiction and interviews in this collection explore the territory that lies between that ideal and its reality, between intention and achievement. That this space has sometimes been perceived by writers as a figurative 'no man's land' is a clear sign of some disappointment. One of the most bitterly ironic evaluations has, sadly, been that of someone who was intimately involved with the academic and political debates on the topic: Robert Harney, founder of the Multicultural History Society of Ontario and University Professor of Ethnic, Immigration and Pluralism Studies at the University of Toronto. For Harney, multiculturalism was 'an idea en route to an ideology fashioned from the rhetoric of ethnocultural impresarios huckstering for the folkloric and visiting British royalty searching for a way to describe the colorfulness of the colonies (no doubt after countless onslaughts by Cree, Blackfoot, and Ukrainians in full ethnic battle dress, herded by red-tunicked guardians of "the Canadian way")'.<sup>12</sup> The authors in this book are rarely so caustic, but their views of the stereotyping and ghettoizing tendencies inherent in multicultural policy and its implementation are testaments to the power of fear, ignorance, and prejudice that even the most idealistic of official ideologies cannot eradicate.

The pluralism that Jacques Godbout refers to here as a 'cultural shopping centre' is now guaranteed by Canadian law, but this has not managed to upset fundamentally the hierarchy (based on class and ethnicity) in our social structures of power that John Porter once called 'the vertical mosaic'. Though the board rooms (as well as the



House of Commons) of Canada do look somewhat different than they did in the mid-1960s, when Porter first wrote about continuing British dominance in terms of prestige and influence, the basic metaphor would appear to hold for the economy, if not the society at large. The lowest-paying work, once undertaken by Slavs, Italians, Portuguese, and Greek immigrants, is now being done by Filipino, Caribbean, East African, Latin American, and Korean immigrants—often women. The titles of books and articles on multiculturalism and immigration in Canada are revealing—and disturbing—in their negativity, titles such as *Double Standard: The Secret History of Canadian Immigration* or *'Dangerous Foreigners': European Immigration Workers and Labour Radicalism in Canada, 1896-1932* or *None Is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe*.

Immigration to this country has been both the result and the cause of major changes. The Multiculturalism Act is one of those changes, and its effects are felt in very obvious things like the various 'ethnic' heritage festivals it supports. This kind of event—and funding—comes under considerable scrutiny in this volume and, typically, there is little agreement on their worth: Toronto's colourful West Indian parade and festival inspire one West Indian writer with pride, while another is embarrassed. In W.D. Valgardson's 'The Man from Snaefellsness' a woman collects 'ethnic' boyfriends, just as she does ethnic foods and dress. Many of the stories and conversations in this book articulate other worries: worries about stereotyping, about fossilizing cultures into unchanging folk memories, about reducing 'otherness' to singing and dancing or exotic food, about relegating non-Anglo and non-French to the margins of Canadian culture where they are prey to tokenism as much as to ghettoizing.

But there are also more positive changes as a result of the Act, and these changes go beyond the multilingual media and services now available and even beyond the heritage language programs in the schools. Beyond and including all these important developments, what has been created is an entire 'discourse' about multiculturalism—a way of thinking and talking about ethnicity and race—that is gradually working to change how Canadians define themselves. Now the National Ethnic Archives in Ottawa, the Multicultural History Society of Ontario in Toronto, and the 'Generations' series of government-sponsored historical accounts of Canada's major ethnocultural groups give us access to other versions of Canada's past. There is an increasing academic interest in Canada's diversity, not only in formal ethnic studies programs, either particular or general, but in English,

sociology, and history departments. In 1973, a Canadian Ethnic Studies Association was founded, and in any given year numerous conferences on topics related to our multicultural identity are held. The publication of journals, articles, and books on the topic has increased dramatically: in 1990 John Miska published his *Minority Literatures in Canada, 1850-1988: A Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Material*—including 5497 references in 65 languages.

Inevitably, this institutionalization of multiculturalism in Canadian society has extended to its literature: writers with names like Ondaatje, Richler, Kogawa, and Wiebe are today as much part of the literary mainstream as are those named Atwood, Munro, Laurence, Findley, Davies, or Hodgins. What we may have become more aware of is that for a Hodgins, for instance, a certain Irish element cannot be ignored, nor can the Irish-Scots for a Munro. Various issues of the *Canadian Fiction Magazine* have brought Canadian black, Asian, Latin American, and other writing to general attention, as have the many particular anthologies of writing from Canadians of Italian, Dutch, Mennonite, and other descents. This expansion of what is published—and thus, taught and read—as 'Canadian' is one of the most exciting and productive results of multiculturalism as both an ideal and a reality in Canada today.

I am not unaware that there are Canadians who see multiculturalism as a sign of the collective historical guilt (or even hypocrisy) resulting from Canada's earlier immigration policies, or who interpret it as a federal stratagem to divert attention from questions about Québécois identity or discontent within Confederation, or the Americanization of Canadian culture and resources. However, as writers as diverse as Rohinton Mistry, Janice Kulyk Keefer, Neil Bissoondath, and, perhaps most interestingly, Tomson Highway suggest, multiculturalism has the more positive possibility—if not yet completely realized—of being an innovative model for civic tolerance and the acceptance of diversity that is appropriate for our democratic pluralist society. In other words, the cynical response is just too easy, and may not be fair. While many of the writers and interviewers in this book do speak to the failures, the limitations, the inadequacies of multiculturalism, they often end up acknowledging at least the potential it holds to allow room for the aspirations of those who do not happen to be of British or French heritage. In the 1960s, when Canadians said they wanted Canada to stay 'Canadian', they usually meant 'not American'. Today, some seem to think that 'Canadian' means French- or (more likely) English-speaking and white. To keep

multiculturalism from becoming just a complacent cliché, we must work to grant everyone access to the material and cultural conditions that will enable the many voices of contemporary Canada, to speak — and be heard — for themselves. That is the purpose of this collection.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Raymond August, 'Babeling Beaver Hunts for Home Fire: The Place of Ethnic Literature in Canada Culture', *Canadian Forum*, August 1974, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup>Placing Truth or Fiction', in *Displaced Persons*, eds Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford (Mundelstrup, Denmark: Dangeroo Press, 1988), p. 156.

<sup>3</sup>Marwan Hassan, *The Confusion of Stones: Two Novellas* (Dunvegan, Ont.: Cormorant Books, 1989), p. 115.

<sup>4</sup>*Toronto Star, Saturday Magazine*, 11 February 1989, p. M13.

<sup>5</sup>In Jars Balan, '“A Word in a Foreign Language”: Ukrainian Influences in George Ryga's Work,' in Jars Balan, ed., *Identifications: Ethnicity and the Writer in Canada* (Edmonton: University of Alberta, Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 1982), p. 50.

<sup>6</sup>In 'Ethnicity and Identity: The Question of One's Literary Passport', panel discussion in Balan, ed., *Identifications*, p. 80. Canadian actress and playwright Linda Griffiths claims that Campbell's awareness of history forced her to rethink her own relation to power and oppression in terms of her Scots heritage. See the many discussions on this topic in *The Book of Jessica: A Theatrical Transformation* (Toronto: Coach House, 1989).

<sup>7</sup>In Jane A. Shapiro, ed., *Voices: From the Eastern Arctic* (Yellowknife: Outcrop Press, 1987), p. 4.

<sup>8</sup>*Toronto Star, Saturday Magazine*, 7 January 1989, p. M24.

<sup>9</sup>'Regionalism and the Canadian Archipelago' in *Heartland and Hinterland: A Geography of Canada*, ed. L.D. McCann (Scarborough, Ont.: Prentice-Hall, 1982), pp. 459-84. My thanks to Germaine Warkentin for bringing this to my attention.

<sup>10</sup>'After 300 Years Our Neurosis Is Relevant', in William Kilbourn, ed., *Canada: A Guide to the Peaceable Kingdom* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1971), p. 10.

<sup>11</sup>'The Peaceable Kingdom Still', special issue, 'In Search of Canada', *Daedalus*, 117, 4 (Fall 1988), p. 27.

<sup>12</sup>'“So Great a Heritage Is Ours”: Immigration and the Survival of the Canadian Polity', in *Daedalus*, 117, 4 (Fall 1988), p. 66.

JOSEF SKVORECKY b. 1924

FROM

## *The Engineer of Human Souls*

The skies they were ashen and sober;  
The leaves they were crispèd and sere —  
The leaves they were withering and sere;  
It was night in the lonesome October. . . .

EDGAR ALLAN POE, 'Ulalume'

The whole range of thought and feeling, yet all in organic  
relation to a ridiculous little waltz tune.

ALDOUS HUXLEY

Outside the window, which is high, narrow and gothic, the cold Canadian wind blends two whitenesses: snowflakes sifting down from lowering clouds and snowdust lifted and whirled by the wind from the land stretching southwards to Lake Ontario. The snow swirls through a white wasteland broken only by a few bare, blackened trees.

Edenvale College stands in a wilderness. In a few years the nearby town of Mississauga is expected to swell and envelop the campus with more variety and colour, but for the time being the college stands in a wilderness, two and a half miles from the nearest housing development. The houses there are no longer all alike: people have learned something since George F. Babbitt's time. Perhaps it was literature that taught them. Now there are at least four different kinds of bungalow spaced at irregular intervals so that the housing development looks like a Swiss village in one of those highly stylized paintings. It is pretty to look at.

But I see it only in my mind's eye, as I look out on the white, cold, windy Canadian landscape. Often, as my thoughts flow, I conjure up again the many wonderful things I have seen in this country of cities with no past. Like the Toronto skyline with its black and white skyscrapers, some plated with golden mirrors, thrusting their peaks into the haze, glowing like burnished chessboards against the eve-