

# Making a Difference

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**Canadian Multicultural  
Literatures in English**

Second Edition

**Edited by Smaro Kamboureli**

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## Introduction to the First Edition

*Making a Difference: An Anthology of Canadian Multicultural Literature* at once celebrates what has been called minority literature in Canada and attempts to change our understanding of what minority literature is.

What makes this anthology of Canadian literature different is its gathering together of both poetry and fiction by authors who come from a wide range of racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Beginning with F.P. Grove and Laura Goodman Salverson, the first non-Anglo-Celtic writers to achieve recognition in Canada, and including First Nations authors, this anthology belongs to the genealogy of Canadian literature, a body of writings that come from a variety of traditions that used to be kept separate from the so-called main tradition.

One of my primary intentions has been to create a space in which contributors to the anthology might dialogue with each other, without suspending their differences. Through their poetry, their fiction, and their statements about their writing that are cited in the headnotes, this anthology enables these authors to speak with each other across boundaries that are marked by many differences. Be they differences of race, of ethnic origin, of gender, of place, of ideological affiliations, or of thematic concerns and aesthetics, they characterize this literature in remarkable ways. Each of the seventy-one contributors speaks in her or his particular accent. I use the word *accent* here not so much as the language marker announcing that the origins of someone—like me, for example—lie outside Canada, but rather as a sign of particularities, of differences that do not become absent or are not rendered silent. The writers in this anthology make a difference because, when read together, they invite the reader to consider the social, political, and cultural contexts that have produced Canadian literature in general and their work in particular. As a collage of voices, *Making a Difference* fashions an image of Canadian culture that reveals how we have come to our present moment in history.

This history speaks of arrivals and departures, trajectories whose starting points contain, more often than not, conflict. It is a history of the legacy of colonization, but also a history of the 'discovery' of Canada as a new home whose 'newness' constantly calls forth the spectre of the past, the nostalgic replay of other geographies. It is also a history of persistent attempts to compose a unified vision of Canadian culture against the reality and cultural understanding of many Canadians, a history that bursts at its seams. It is, in other words, a history haunted by dissonance. This history, which is paradoxically one of plenitude and of disquieting gaps, is what the subtitle of the anthology intends to evoke.

*Canadian Multicultural Literature*. In some respects, one word too many. For Canadian literature is, should be thought of as, reflecting the multicultural make-up of the country. That I feel compelled to spell this out, that I do so at a time when, for example, some of the contributors to this anthology have won some of the most coveted Canadian literary prizes, suggests that Canadian literature—Canadian literature as an institution—is still not as diverse as it should be. Prizes do not by themselves establish the literary significance of an author; still, they confer on authors a validity, they sanction the kind of affirmation that the Canadian literary establish-

ment has long denied Aboriginal writers and writers of non-Anglo-Celtic backgrounds. *Making a Difference* intends to reflect the changed—and changing—state of cultural affairs in Canada.



In explaining how I came to select and represent the writers included in this anthology, I can only begin by resorting to the cliché offered by other anthologists. No sooner is an anthology complete than it begins to address its own gaps; it can only exist within the ellipses it creates.

While working on this project, I remained profoundly aware of the fact that inclusion is synonymous with exclusion. The irony that an anthology of this kind is, in many ways, a response to earlier cases of exclusion informed my wish to compile an anthology that would represent Canadian writing while calling into question representation itself. In many respects, this is an impossible task, perhaps even a preposterous ambition. Yet, if I were to reconstruct what prompted me in the first place to compile this anthology, the questioning of representation would figure prominently as both one of my primary goals and one of my guiding principles. I believe that we reside forever within the realm of representation: we represent ourselves through language and through our bodies, but we also see ourselves represented by others. No image, no story, no anthology can represent us or others without bringing into play—serious play—differing contexts, places, or people.

*Making a Difference* attempts to question representation in a number of ways, perhaps most significantly by challenging the concept of minority. All the contributors, by virtue of their race and ethnicity, belong to the manifold 'margins' that the Canadian dominant society has historically devised. Yet, if we consider these authors in the various contexts that have produced their writing, it becomes apparent that 'marginalization', from an individual as well as a collective perspective, is impossible to define in any stable way.

These authors' experiences with Canadian publishers, the reception of their work, their personal histories in Canada, how they position themselves with regard to their cultural differences, the diverse treatment of their racial and ethnic groups by the Canadian dominant society, how (if at all) these experiences are translated into literature—all these and other related issues argue persuasively to one conclusion: that the concept of marginality has no inherent meaning in itself. As Russell Ferguson says,

When we say marginal, we must always ask, marginal to what? But this question is difficult to answer. The place from which power is exercised is often a hidden place. When we try to pin it down, the center always seems to be somewhere else. Yet we know that this phantom center, elusive as it is, exerts a real, undeniable power over the whole social framework of our culture, and over the ways we think about it.<sup>1</sup>

1 'Introduction: Invisible Center', *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990), 9.



Minority literature, then, is nothing other than a construct, an expression of the power and literary politics of any given time.

This is why we see in *Making a Difference*, for example, a writer like Lee Maracle alongside a writer like Michael Ondaatje. Maracle might be one of the most prolific and widely read Native authors, but she began her writing career by publishing her own books because no Canadian publisher would publish her. Ondaatje, on the other hand, has long enjoyed a national reputation and has recently achieved international status. Similarly, Marlene Nourbese Philip and Dionne Brand are often now included in courses on Canadian literature and have become the focus of recent critical studies, but their lives and writing careers clearly reflect the discrimination and racism they have encountered in Canada. In contrast, Evelyn Lau has had her work published by mainstream presses, and resists writing out of, or identifying with, her ethnic community. In a different way, Frank Paci has been writing fiction for years, but only recently, after the success of Nino Ricci's first novel, to which his work has been compared, has he become more widely recognized. Difference, then, is always a matter of intensity, and is weighed differently in given historical moments. Its meanings are variable, shifting, even provisional.

My selection of contributors was intended to reflect, in part, a counterreading of what we have come to call mainstream and minority literatures in Canada. Multicultural literature is not minority writing, for it does not raise issues that are of minor interest to Canadians. Nor is it, by any standard, of lesser quality than the established literary tradition. Its thematic concerns are of such a diverse range that they show the binary structure of 'centre' and 'margins', which has for so long informed discussions of Canadian literature, to be a paradigm of the history of political and cultural affairs in Canada.

I did not want this anthology to be an instance of tokenism, and this was yet another factor that has informed my selections. By holding onto what the 'otherness' of writers—be it ethnicity, race, or gender—is in relation to the dominant culture's self-image, tokenism assigns a single meaning to cultural differences. It masks the many nuances of difference. On the one hand, it homogenizes the diversity that multiculturalism is intent on embracing; on the other, it disregards the fact that a writer's identity and the meaning of a poem or a short story cannot be defined in any single way.

Since the late 1980s, in response to the currency that multiculturalism has achieved in the political, social, and academic arenas, anthologies, critical studies, and course syllabi have gradually begun to include authors who have been traditionally excluded from mainstream representation. These gradual and tentative changes have been necessary steps toward revising our understanding of what constitutes Canadian literature. Yet many of these attempts, however well intended, have resulted in further consolidating the minority position of the selected writers. Representing Canada's multiculturalism with a spattering of only one or two authors, making such writers visible only by viewing them as representative of their cultural groups, does virtually nothing to dispel the 'marginality' attributed to those authors.

I have attempted to avoid such pitfalls by considering the contributors to this anthology as Canadian writers, and not as representatives of cultural groups. The

tendency to read multicultural literature through the racial or ethnic labels affixed to its authors more often than not reinforces stereotypical images of the authors themselves and of their cultural communities. Labels are vexing and sneaky things because they are intended to express a stable and universal representation of both communities and individuals. By implying that there is a specific essence, say, to the writing of First Nations authors, labels prematurely foreclose our understanding not only of the complexity inherent in individual communities but also of the various ways in which authors position themselves within their cultural groups and the Canadian society at large. As Jeannette Armstrong has written,

First Nations cultures, in their various contemporary forms, whether an urban-modern, pan-Indian experience or clearly a tribal specific (traditional or contemporary), whether it is Eastern, Arctic, Plains, Southwest or West Coastal in region, have unique sensibilities which shape the voices coming forward into written English Literature.<sup>2</sup>

The particular relations of writers to culture, the complex contexts within which they write, are always inscribed in the literature itself. And this is the reason why this anthology is not organized by cultural groups.

Even when a community claims a writer as its spokesperson, or when a writer voluntarily takes on that role, she or he must write out of a space of difference. The difference is made by the writing act itself, by a writerly belief in language as an act of the imagination, by a faith in the power of language, irrespective of its forms and contours, to effect change, to make us perceive ourselves and those around us *otherwise*.

Roy Kiyooka once said that, for him, 'to survive in this culture was essentially a quest for language as the modality of power about which you could be present in the world.'<sup>3</sup> In searching for potential contributors, this is what I have looked for: how these writers make themselves 'present in the world', how they articulate their relation to language and to culture. That many authors in *Making a Difference* share the same cultural background is, in many respects, a fortuitous result of my selection process. That the writing of those who have a common heritage often echoes similar themes and just as often reflects different concerns, attests that cultural boundaries are porous, that cultural representation is contingent on the authors' singularity of imagination. No single form of literary representation can adequately reflect a community's complexity. Indeed, the variety of authors that come from and write about individual groups resists any notion of a sole authentic image of those communities.

Thus, both Himani Bannerji and Rohinton Mistry come from India, but their writing gestures toward different spaces. This reflects not only the richness and diversity of Indian culture, but also their individual sensibilities. Armin Wiebe, Sandra Birdsell, Rudy Wiebe, Patrick Friesen and Di Brandt are all known as Mennonite writers, but their Mennonite experiences are coded differently in their writing.

2 'Editor's Note', *Looking at the Words of our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature*, ed. Jeannette Armstrong (Penticton, BC: Theytus Books Ltd, 1993), 7.

3 As cited in Roy Miki, 'Inter-Face: Roy Kiyooka's Writing, A Commentary/Interview', *Roy Kiyooka* (Vancouver: Artspeak Gallery and the Or Gallery, 1991), 48.

Furthermore, it would be reductive to read their work only through the signs of Mennonite background and, as a result, ignore all the other elements that contribute to the complexity of their writing. Communities have a social and cultural coherence, but they are also characterized by fluidity. No constellation of literary images can singlehandedly mould a community's particular ethos. We must read the distinctive ways in which authors identify with, or resist, their communities in the context of other historical factors that permeate their work.

As Thomas King says, 'when we talk about Native writers, we talk as though we have a process for determining who is a Native writer and who is not, when, in fact, we don't. What we do have is a collection of literary works by individual authors who are Native by ancestry, and our hope, as writers and critics, is that if we wait long enough, the sheer bulk of this collection, when it reaches some sort of critical mass, will present us with a matrix within which a variety of patterns can be discerned.'<sup>4</sup> It is my hope that *Making a Difference* will have a similar effect, that its readers will develop an incremental understanding of who its contributors are and what they tell us about the history of our multicultural tradition.

My selection process has also been informed by my desire to represent Canadian multicultural literature by bridging the gap between established and emerging authors. Many contributors—like Austin Clarke, Joseph Skvorecky, Joy Kogawa, Aritha van Herk, M.G. Vassanji—have produced substantial bodies of work that have influenced both our overall appreciation of their writing and some of the ways in which we approach Canadian literature. Presenting these authors alongside, for example, Zaffi Gousopoulos and Corinne Allyson Lee, who have so far published only in literary magazines, or next to authors like Hiromi Goto, Yasmin Ladha, Nice Rodriguez, and Ashok Mathur, who have so far published only one book each, reflects my attempt to give the reader a broad view of what Canadian multicultural literature has to offer at this point in time.

My intention to represent Canadian multicultural literature while questioning the label of minority attached to it has also led to my decision to organize the contents of this anthology according to the birthdates of authors. This arrangement, I believe, affords the reader a historical overview while, at the same time, dispelling the notion that multicultural writing is only a recent phenomenon. I would like to stress that I am not offering *Making a Difference* as an anthology that claims to redress all the gaps of cultural difference in the Canadian literary canon. No anthology could purport to do that. Any anthology that intends to offer a historical overview can only function as an allegory of literary history, can only map out yet another narrative path by which we can enter that history. Like all anthologies, *Making a Difference*, too, has gaps, but what it does not include, I hope, is balanced by the various ways in which I have tried to remain alert to change and limits.

How we function as subjects of our own representations and how we figure as objects in the representations of others; how culture is defined and who implements

those definitions; what or who devises the boundaries that determine how cultural difference, be it celebrated or curtailed, is represented—all these questions have been central to the making of this anthology. In my selection process I was guided by the belief that multiculturalism disputes certain kinds of representation, the kinds that are built around the principle of sameness, of cohesiveness, of linear development.

The seventy-one contributors represented here are introduced by headnotes that include both biographical information and, with a few exceptions, comments by the authors themselves. Although there was no difficulty collecting material about the lives and writing careers of most of these contributors, in some cases gathering information proved to be a real challenge. This accounts for some of the inconsistencies that appear in the kinds of information and material provided. Furthermore, I have encountered some discrepancies in dates and other facts in the various sources that I have consulted. I have tried to resolve those problems to the best of my ability.

The authors' statements cited in the headnotes come from interviews, from their essays (included in the bibliography that appears at the end of this volume) or, in many cases, from comments written by the authors. Beyond the need to introduce the basic outline of individual careers, the headnotes are designed to let the contributors speak for themselves about their writing. I am, of course, responsible for the specific comments that I cite, and I am aware that I mediate these writers' own self-representations. But representation, as I have already tried to explain, is a matter of construction, always something that stands in for something else.

Some of the comments I cite address issues about which many of the contributors have often spoken. I have taken this to reflect a persistent concern on their part and on the part of their audiences, and thus I have included such comments. How they became writers, how they approach their subject matter, what they think of language or the function of literature are some of these issues. I have also included statements which show the diversity of the cultural and social spaces from which these writers come, and which demonstrate that Canada, historically and culturally, has been both a troubling and an exciting place to inhabit.

Thus while some of the contributors speak of their resistance to labels like ethnicity and of the relationship of their cultural origins to their writing, they do so in different ways. The narrative that emerges from these comments is, then, one of contradictions, of differences. What is consistent is the anxiety many of these authors share about any homogenous image of Canadian culture, their concern with the tendency of readers and the media to represent their identities and their writings in minority terms, irrespective of the power with which some of these minority spaces are invested today. Like the literature included in this anthology, these comments illustrate that the differences that permeate Canadian multiculturalism are not to be seen as barriers but as signs of complexity.



The literature in *Making a Difference* offers different soundings of the social and cultural body of Canada. Since its beginnings, the making of Canadian literature has

<sup>4</sup> 'Introduction', *All My Relations: An Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Native Fiction* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1990), x.



coincided, in many respects, with the making of the Canadian state. Far from being a Canadian phenomenon alone, this overlap shows how literature, like other cultural expressions, measures the pulse of a nation. What might be particularly Canadian, however, is the kind of anxiety that has continued to characterize both what Canadian literature is and what constitutes Canadian identity. This is not surprising since Canada as a state is, relatively speaking, new. And it also explains David Taras's claim that 'there has been throughout Canadian history a passion for identity.'<sup>5</sup> Few would dispute this. What is disputed, though, is the overwhelming tendency to define Canadian identity in collective and unifying terms, this despite, or perhaps because of, the legacy of colonialism and the overpowering evidence that Canada has always been a place of diversities—racial, ethnic, and linguistic.

The binary structure which *Making a Difference* attempts to dissolve, that of 'centre' and 'margin', is part and parcel of Canada's colonial history, of its attempt to construct a Canadian identity that is modelled after the image of the colonizers. This, too, is consistent with the patterns of colonialism elsewhere. For in the history of Western domination, the paradigm of 'centre' and 'margin', as Gyan Prakash writes,

surfaces precisely at the point where the encounter with cultural difference is organized into the colonizer/colonized polarity, where the historicist notion of history gathers 'people without history' into its fold, and where the metropolitan culture speaks to the marginalized in the language of its supremacist myths.<sup>6</sup>

In Canada's colonial history, 'the encounter with cultural difference' was, for all intents and purposes, a non-encounter. The British and French colonizers saw themselves as settlers, as arriving in a land that was taken to be more or less empty. The presence, cultural differences, spirituality, and languages of the Aboriginal peoples, the people who live in what we now call Canada, were not seen as having any inherent value. The land they inhabited, and which they continue to inhabit, was deemed to be ready for the taking. And this remained the case for a long time.

Canadian history, until relatively recently, perpetuated this image of Canada as a land that was 'discovered', not a land that was colonized. As Olive Patricia Dickason says,

Canada, it used to be said by non-Indians . . . is a country of much geography and little history. . . . How can such a thing be said, much less believed, when people have been living here for thousands of years? As [Aboriginals] see it, Canada has fifty-five founding nations rather than the two that have been officially acknowledged. . . . Canada's history has usually been presented not as beginning with the first Europeans, the Norse, who arrived here in about AD 1000, but with the French, who came . . . in the sixteenth century.<sup>7</sup>

5 'Introduction', *A Passion for Identity: An Introduction to Canadian Studies*, ed. Eli Mandel and David Taras (Toronto, New York: Methuen, 1987), 10.

6 *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements*, ed. Gyan Prakash (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1995), 4.

7 *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1992), 11.

The myth that Canada was 'discovered' was intended to hide the fact that what we now call Canada has always belonged to other peoples, peoples with their own distinct languages and cultures.

Jeannette Armstrong's comments in this collection indicate the unequivocal presence of the rich and diverse cultures of Aboriginal peoples. She grew up in the nurturing environment of 'a traditional family . . . with a long history', a history that includes 'the total purity of our language', the Okanagan language that has 'been handed down through thousands of years'. But her Okanagan people have been one of the First Nations groups fortunate enough to maintain their language. As Armstrong says,

I remember as a teenager that I began to understand the value of being who I am, an Okanagan woman, a person who has been educated and taught things that other people did not have access to. Many of our people were coerced and brutalized for speaking their language and practicing their culture until their memory grew distant and dim.

The early constructions of Canada as a unified nation were synonymous with the kind of colonial practices that Armstrong talks about—the imposed invisibility of First Nations peoples through such institutions as residential schools.

Some legislation and empirical conditions might have changed since then, but the prevailing notions of Canada as a nation, of Canadian identity, and of Canadian literature are still sequestered within this legacy of colonialism. As Lee Maracle has said, 'Unless I was sleeping during the revolution, we have not had a change in our condition.'<sup>8</sup> In this respect, the circumstances of Maracle's protagonist in the story included in this anthology must be seen not only as isolated events taking place in the life of a single woman but as part of the continuum of Canadian history. As the narrator of the story tells us, Bertha's 'memory retreats to another time', a time when 'Bertha was not called Bertha', when the 'home' for which Bertha longs is a place that can be conjured up only through happy but also troubled memories:

Home was a young girl rushing through a meadow, a cedar basket swishing lightly against dew-laden leaves [. . .] while her mind enjoyed the prospect of becoming . . . becoming, and the words in English would not come. She remembered the girl, the endless stories told to her, the meanings behind each story, the careful coaching in the truth that lay behind each one, the reasons for their telling, but she could not, after fifty years of speaking crippled English, define where it was all supposed to lead.

The stories that Bertha was told as a child were, are, part of the oral tradition of the First Nations peoples, the cultural heritage that the official history of Canada has systematically ignored. In the story, Bertha is defeated by the burden of her memories, by the ways in which she and her people have been disenfranchised. Yet the memory of her life, her attempt at 'whispering her sorrow in the gentle words of their ancestors', is passed on to a young girl.

8 'The "Post-Colonial" Imagination', *Fuse* 16, 1 (Fall 1992): 13.

This passing on, this linking of the past and the present with gestures that speak at once of cultural genocide and cultural pride, of elision and perseverance, forms part of the continuum of Canadian history. It is a continuum that persists against the gaps that mark the official history of Canada. This is the continuum within which Lee Maracle, like other First Nations authors, writes: 'I can spiral out into the world', she says, 'to reconceive of place. I can stretch time. I can erase the artifice of separation that divides today from yesterday and yesterday from tomorrow. In this place all time is the same time. In this place images speak reality—paint truth in believable pictures.'<sup>9</sup>

The various attempts over time to define Canada as a cohesive nation, to invent a homogenous Canadian identity—an identity minus the identities of the Aboriginal peoples, and later the identities of new immigrants—has not been the only pattern that has determined the course of Canadian history. Despite its aggressive tactics, the colonial construction of Canadian identity has not remained unchallenged. During the course of Canadian history there have always been attempts to redefine this construction of a cohesive identity, even to displace it.

Ironically, some of these challenges stemmed, and in a way continue to do so, from the very force and exploitative tactics through which the colonial establishment attempted to consolidate its position. The Chinese Immigration Act of 1923, following earlier discriminatory legislation against Chinese immigrants, which, with few exceptions, prevented the arrival of Chinese people in Canada, is one example among many that discloses the early perception of a dominant Canadian identity to be dominant only insofar as other identities were systematically kept out of or at the periphery of Canadian society.

The comments and the writing in this anthology by Jim Wong Chu and Sky Lee reinforce the fact that the inherited notion of a unified Canadian identity has only imaginative coherence. And as Sky Lee's first book, *Disappearing Moon Café*, suggests, this kind of imaginative coherence has not been a strategy employed by mainstream societies alone. As Kae, the novel's narrator, finds out, her Chinese-Canadian family harbours a secret—or many secrets—that hold the key to how a community might internalize the racism that constructs its position as 'other' to dominant society. Due partly to the Chinese traditions that they bring to Canada and partly to the pressures they experience in Vancouver, Kae's ancestors try to conceal the knowledge that their Chinese patriarch had a child, and a male one at that, with Kelora, a Native woman. Their elaborate attempts to maintain for a long time a pure image of their cultural origins has disastrous effects on the younger generations. Yet the novel also shows the importance of hidden histories, the need to disperse the notion of cultural authenticity. This is the kind of imperative that tells us that cultural identity, as Stuart Hall has put it, 'is a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being".'<sup>10</sup>

The homogenous image of Canadian identity, Canada as 'a white man's country', is still an image we have to come to terms with by rereading and rediscovering the histories hidden behind it. As Elliot L. Tepper writes,

the process of integrating a more complete history of Canada into public consciousness is at its earliest stages. . . . Settlement history in general seems to plod methodically, and haphazardly, from 'European' to French to British to Other, an enduring image which has been politically useful but empirically incomplete.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, the unified image of Canadian identity has always exhibited fissures and shown itself to be fragile, full of anxiety to maintain, and redefine, its tenuous hold on power. We have come to see the constitutional debates, the recurrence of which characterize the modern history of Canada, as a syndrome that has afflicted many Canadians with 'constitutional fatigue'. This should not prevent us from seeing what they really mean: that Canada is a state in continual process, in a constant state of re-vision. The Meech Lake Accord and the Charlottetown Agreement, under the aegis of Brian Mulroney's government, were two of the most recent attempts at 'nation building'. They instigated yet another round of talks and soul-searching about what Canadian means. Most recently, the 1995 Quebec referendum had, in different ways, the same effect. Such political events, and the many Royal Commissions that precede and follow them, point to one thing. The unity of Canadian identity is a cultural myth, a myth that can be sustained only by eclipsing the identities of others.

We are at a point now where the presumed uniqueness of Canadian identity is only that—a presumption. *Making a Difference* is testimony to the fact that we can no longer harbour the conceit that Canadian identity is homogenous.



Beginning with the 1971 policy of multiculturalism, introduced by Pierre Trudeau, and later with Bill C-93, the 'Act for the preservation and enhancement of multiculturalism in Canada' legislated in 1988, we have entered a new and formative period in Canadian history, what we can call the multicultural stage of Canadian cultural politics. According to K. Victor Ujimoto, 'Canada was the first and only nation in the world to establish a Multiculturalism Act.'<sup>12</sup> This might be so, but it is interesting to remind ourselves how the official acknowledgement of Canada's multicultural heritage was framed.

The federal policy of multiculturalism was the result of the work of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, whose Report covers six volumes (1967–70), including one entitled *The Cultural Contribution of the Other Ethnic Groups* (1969). The Commission's 1963 mandate was, as reported in its 1969 volume, to 'make recommendations designed to ensure the bilingual and basically bicultural character of the federal administration', and to find ways of 'promoting bilingualism, better cultural relations and a more wide-spread appreciation of the basically bicultural character of our country and of the subsequent contribution made by the other cultures'.

11 'Immigration Policy and Multiculturalism', *Ethnicity and Culture in Canada*, ed. J.W. Berry and J.A. Lapointe (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1994), 97, 98.

12 'Multiculturalism and the Global Information Society', *Deconstructing a Nation: Immigration, Multiculturalism and Racism in '90s Canada*, ed. Vic Satzewich (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, and Social Research Unit, Department of Sociology, University of Saskatchewan, 1992), 351.

9 'The "Post-Colonial" Imagination', 14.

10 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), 394.



The Report's recommendations led to the 1969 Canadian Official Languages Act. By establishing French and English as the official languages of the country, this Act further reinforced the notion that the French and the British were the two founding nations of Canada. Still, the Act did very little to appease Quebec's anxiety about the sovereignty of its culture (in 1977 French was declared the single official language in Quebec), and accomplished little more in the rest of Canada. In English Canada, many of the objections were voiced in the western provinces, where there is a long-standing resistance to bilingualism and where ethnic groups, at the time notably Ukrainian-Canadians, felt further marginalized by the Act.

Indeed, the 1971 White Paper, Trudeau's policy of multiculturalism, and the subsequent Bill C-93, which passed while Brian Mulroney's government was getting ready for the 1988 elections, did nothing to realign the colonial ideology of official history. The White Paper was intended to preserve the heritage of 'the other cultures'; it reiterated that there are two official languages, but stressed that there were 'no official cultures'. In a similar fashion, Bill C-93 declared that, 'whereas . . . English and French are the official languages of Canada', it proposes to 'recognize and promote the understanding that multiculturalism reflects the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society', and promises 'to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage'. The 1971 policy does not mention the First Nations peoples, and the 1988 Act specifically excludes them. The Canada Clause of the Charlottetown Agreement intended to rectify this omission by acknowledging the status of cultures other than those of the two official languages, but the Agreement was rejected (not necessarily for reasons related to multiculturalism) in the 1992 referendum. These are just a few of the factors that led to the official policy of multiculturalism. The legislative Acts as well as the events and political agendas that have given rise to them register some of the recent ways in which Canadian identity has wavered from one form of representation to another.

It is apparent that the history of Canadian multiculturalism is not a simple, linear narrative. It is a narrative that has many beginnings, a narrative that unravels in many directions. No matter what narrative thread we resolve to follow, some of the inherited perceptions about Canada have been decidedly altered. The land we now call Canada was already multicultural, and multilingual, before the arrival of the first Europeans. As J. McGee shows in his *Loyalist Mosaic* (1984), even the United Empire Loyalists who settled Upper Canada consisted of diverse ethnic groups. And George Elliott Clarke, in his comments cited in this anthology, makes it clear the origins of the Black people in the Maritimes go back to 1783 and 1815, when the Black Loyalists and Refugees arrived in Nova Scotia. The fact that the Dominion Parliament introduced an Immigration Act in 1906 intended to control the influx of Asian immigrants to Canada is not only an example in a series of discriminatory practices that belong, in effect, to the history of Canada's multiculturalism, but is also further evidence that the cohesiveness of Canadian identity has always been imaginary.

But not everyone would necessarily agree with this position. Multiculturalism signifies different things to different people, and has not been embraced with the same enthusiasm by all Canadians. Indeed, as Vic Satzewich points out,

if multiculturalism is under attack from some for being too successful in promoting cultural pluralism, it is ironic that it has also come under attack by others for not promoting enough pluralism. That is, the traditional critique of multiculturalism has been that it promoted only symbolic ethnicity, or those aspects of non-anglo ethnic cultures which did not threaten the anglo-saxon dominated status quo.<sup>13</sup>

For some Canadians, then, the tolerance they see multiculturalism advocating threatens their understanding of Canadian history and augurs against the development of a cohesive Canadian identity, which they think should be the goal of the nation. For others, it is the very notion of tolerance to which they object, for tolerance alone does not promise that those who have traditionally been constructed as 'others' will be able fully to practise who they are as individual subjects. Along the same lines, multiculturalism has been attacked for offering a policy of containment, a policy which, by legislating 'otherness', attempts to control its diverse representations, to preserve the long-standing racial and ethnic hierarchies in Canada. The question of preservation has also been tackled in a different way, for some Canadians believe that the mandate of Bill C-93 to 'preserve' and 'enhance' the cultural heritage of Canadians other than those of Anglo-Saxon and French descent tends to promote stereotypical images of their cultures, and advocates a kind of ethnocentrism that might further prevent their integration into mainstream society. Thus while multiculturalism is expected to facilitate the process of decolonizing the inherited representations of Canadian history, the literary tradition, and other forms of culture, it is also seen as essentializing race and ethnicity, namely assigning to racial and ethnic differences, as well as their various expressions, attributes that are taken to be 'natural', and therefore stable.

In the field of literature, many of the contributors to *Making a Difference* have played a direct or indirect role in shaping our understanding of these arguments. As for myself, I believe that within this complex web of historical changes, cultural differences, and politics there still remains the fundamental question of what constitutes Canadian identity. But in the 1990s this question has been reconfigured, and, I think, irrevocably so. For we can no longer afford to think of Canadian identity in singular terms. Its imaginary cohesiveness has already collapsed upon itself. Nor can we afford to cavalierly dismiss the current interest in cultural differences as a mere fad, or an obsession. The recognition of cultural differences in the 1990s marks yet another beginning in Canadian multicultural history, the beginning of an attempt to understand how distinct identities can converge and dialogue with each other within Canada, how boundaries of difference must be repositioned—not in relation to the signs of 'centre' and 'margins' but in relation to new and productive alignments.

*Making a Difference: Canadian Multicultural Literature* is an instance of such a dialogue. The writing and the comments of the contributors in *Making a Difference* help animate some of Canada's multicultural realities. Students reading this anthology will discover how Canadian multicultural literature tugs at the seams of the fabric that is

13 'Introduction', *Deconstructing a Nation*, 15.



Canadian culture. They will see that for these writers, and for many others who could not be included in this collection, who we are as Canadians is contingent upon how we move from one context to another, how we cross the thresholds of memories, how we embrace or, for that matter, keep away from the differences we encounter, how we negotiate our histories in the context of other histories.

These kinds of convergences and negotiations have been the focus of an abundance of publications about multiculturalism, immigration experience, and the issues that pertain to the First Nations peoples within such disciplines as sociology, anthropology, law, political sciences and education. Yet Canadian literary criticism has shown a belated interest in these issues. Since the late 1980s, however, the increased publication of ethnic and Native anthologies and bibliographies, the various conferences and gatherings of writers aimed at resisting both the stereotypical reception of their work and the way they have been, if at all, represented in curricula, and the fact that now both large and small presses publish authors once considered to be only 'minor', have dramatically altered the amount and kinds of critical response to their work. As Enoch Padolsky says,

Twenty or thirty years ago literature in English Canada consisted primarily of writings by British-Canadian writers and a few individuals from a small number of Canadian ethnic minority groups (e.g., Icelandic, Jewish, Ukrainian). Today, Canadian literature reflects a much broader proportion of a changing Canadian society and both the number of writers and the group experiences represented have expanded dramatically. Not surprisingly, this increasing diversity is having an impact on the way Canadian literature is perceived, and a number of critical, theoretical, and institutional issues have arisen because of it. At the moment these issues are in the process of being absorbed into a literary critical scene which also reflects other kinds of theoretical and critical challenges (e.g., feminism, post-colonialism, new historicism) and though changes in Canadian literary scholarship with regard to ethnic minority writing are clearly in the wind, the resolution of these new issues still lies in the future.<sup>14</sup>

I have stressed the construction of identity as a primary concern in multicultural literature. But I am also arguing that the representation of the differences, as Padolsky points out, must not be seen exclusively in terms of the question of identity, no matter how identity is configured. The authors in *Making a Difference* write by following the trajectories of their imaginations, and these lead them along many and diverse paths.



'The imagination has a history,' says Guy Davenport, a history 'as yet unwritten, and it has a geography, as yet only dimly seen.'<sup>15</sup> It is the imagination of the writers included in this anthology that others our perceptions of reality, that invokes the figure

of identity, that shows their geographies and their communities, their concerns with love, family, gendered bodies, to be unlimited. Unlimited in that these writers show the histories of these spaces and images to be forever written, unlearned, revised, transplanted, invented. 'For', as Iain Chambers says, 'to write is, of course, to travel.'<sup>16</sup> Reading through the poetry and fiction of the seventy-one authors in this anthology is indeed like taking a journey. It is a journey that takes us to many places, but also a journey that takes many forms and shapes. As the narrator of Yasmin Ladha's story says, directly addressing us as readers, 'Between you and me, there is no glint of a badge. Badges are razor sharp. Between you and me, the ink quivers.'

Much of the writing in *Making a Difference* involves actual travel, the kinds of departures and arrivals that accompany people of any diaspora. Diaspora—the dispersal of a people around the world—necessitated as it is often by major historical upheavals, carries along with it seeds from the original land that help the people on the move and their descendants to root themselves in the new place. The experience of displacement, the process of acculturation or integration, the gaps between generations, the tensions between individuals and their communities—these are some of the themes that inform diasporic literature. Sustaining a link with the past, paying homage to histories that one cannot afford to forget—or perhaps writing out of what they know best, as some writers would put it—is another important feature of diasporic writing.

For example, the poetry included here by Rachel Korn, A.M. Klein, and Irving Layton is deeply rooted in the experiences of the Jewish diaspora. Within this context, the short story by J.J. Steinfeld is a literal dramatization of the Holocaust experience of the female narrator's mother. As she rehearses her role in her one-woman play, she both relives her mother's experiences and tries 'to escape the character' she plays. But she knows that, in many respects, this is not just a one-woman drama: the past, she admits, is also a 'tangible character' in the drama. Her acting is an acting out of the past, an attempt to come to terms with the demons of history. Both this woman and the female narrator of Helen Weinzwieg's story are born in Radom, Poland, not a mere coincidence in the context of this literature, but a significant detail that helps us locate it historically. Art, this time painting, and movement between a marriage and a love affair are the ways in which Weinzwieg's character attempts to deal with her memories.

In a different way, the fiction of Harold Sonny Ladoo and Arnold Itwaru directly addresses the places from which they come. They show their settings to be storied places, places layered with the impact of colonialism, colonial desire, and its detrimental effects, especially on women. The function of language as a means of control is Marlene Nourbese Philip's point of entry into her critique of colonialism. The different kinds of discourse that she uses in her poetry are aimed to reveal that tracing the genealogy of a self must also involve uncovering the genealogy of language, an issue that also characterizes Jamila Ismail's poetry.

Indeed, language—language not as a mere instrument of communication but language as that which constructs the articulations of ourselves—is a recurring concern for many of the writers in this anthology. The title of Dionne Brand's long poem, *No*

<sup>14</sup> 'Canadian Ethnic Minority Literature in English', *Ethnicity and Culture in Canada*, 361.

<sup>15</sup> *The Geography of the Imagination* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), 4.

<sup>16</sup> *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London and New York: Routledge Press, 1994), 10.

*Language Is Neutral*, sections of which appear here, makes it clear that any neutrality attached to language only helps to conceal the various gestures of elision by which representation operates. 'No / language is neutral seared in the spine's unravelling. / Here is history too,' she says. And if this history, as I read her, is structured like a language, it is because the 'grammar' of the black people's experiences that she writes about bears the unmistakable signs of enslavement: 'talking was left for night and hush was idiom / and hot core.'

Fred Wah's desire 'to touch the sight of the letter oral tactile', to chase his fleeting memories of his father's writing hand as it moves the 'silver, black, gold nib' of a pen across a page, to understand how language inhabits his body, is a desire that reflects our passage 'through the language of time'. He makes us aware of how we are, in a certain way, 'histographs', because the representations of ourselves reside in, and are always inscribed by, history, a concern manifested in different ways in Kristjana Gunnars's and Aritha van Herk's prose.

The writing act as a specific manifestation of language is another way in which language appears in this literature. Many of these poems and stories are, literally, scenes of writing, scenes in which we see a writer at work. In the journal entries that record Daphne Marlatt's first return to the place where she was brought up, she wonders how to 'get' everything 'down'. So we see her watching over her own writing act: 'How completely i learned to talk Canadian (how badly i wanted to). . . . Wonder how it sounds to you?' she says in a letter she writes back home. How to get everything down is the same question that seems to preoccupy the protagonist of Makeda Silvera's story, a black woman who tries to be a writer while also trying to fulfill most of the roles expected of a woman.

Pressures similar to those that Silvera's protagonist experiences permeate much of the writing in this anthology. The questions of how gender is constructed, how the representation of gender impinges upon desire and sexuality, how who we are as men or women relates to where we come from are addressed in various ways by such authors as Claire Harris, Mary di Michele, Di Brandt, Yes him Ternar, Sandra Birdsell, M.G. Vassanji, Ian Iqbal Rashid, Ven Begamudre, and Shyam Selvadurai. Ashok Mathur's story focuses these concerns on his protagonist's body, a body that is not transparent in that it cannot easily be read as male or female. Beyond questioning the conventional representations of gender difference, this story also brings to the fore one of the most significant issues in multicultural literature, that of racialization. Concern with racialization, the construction of images of ourselves or of others by relying on the loaded and biased ideological definitions of racial categories, one of the processes that leads to racism, surfaces in much of the writing in this anthology. Corinne Lee, Roy Miki, Joy Kogawa, and Himani Bannerji are some of the writers who directly address this issue.

If some of the writing in this anthology, as I have suggested, deals with themes that directly pertain to the diasporic experience, there are also authors here who write from a diametrically opposed experience: the knowledge of not having been separated at all from their lands, but having been systematically denied the right to their places and cultures. The writing of Beth Brant, Daniel David Moses, Thomas King, Jeannette Armstrong, and Lee Maracle, and many other First Nations authors and storytellers

who could not be included here, is a reminder to other Canadians that we have all been travellers, that, somewhere in our personal or familial histories in the recent or distant past, we all belonged somewhere else. And what is most pertinent about this reminder is that the first foreign travellers who came here came under the pretence of coming to an empty land. At the end of Beth Brant's creation story, 'First Woman touched her body, feeling the movements inside. She touched the back of Mother and waited for the beings who would change her world.'



*Making a Difference: Canadian Multicultural Literature* is a gathering of voices that offer the reader only a sampling of what Canadian literature is about today. Beyond my own attempt here to introduce some of the contexts and concerns of this literature, it is the task of the readers to discover for themselves what these authors invite us to share with them.

'"Cultures" do not hold still for their portraits,' says James Clifford.<sup>17</sup> *Making a Difference* is a living and changing portrait of Canadian literature, a portrait that invites the reader in as one of the subjects. We portray ourselves by reading together.

17 'Introduction: Partial Truths', *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: U of California P, 1986), 10.