

Making a Difference

**Canadian Multicultural
Literatures in English**

Second Edition

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The writer spent many days and nights staring at the blank white paper in front of her. The villagers did not ease up. They criticized the blank white paper. It was only a few days before the conference. 'You have to start writing,' they pressured her. 'Who is going to represent us?'

Words swarmed around her head like wasps. There was so much she wanted to say about 'Writing as a Dangerous Profession', about dangers to her as a Black woman, writer, lesbian. At times she felt that writing the paper was hopeless. Once she broke down and cried in front of the villagers. On this particular day, as the hour grew close, she felt desperate—suicidal, in fact. The villagers had no sympathy for her.

'Suicide? You madder than Maddie!' they jeered. 'Give Maddie the paper and let her use her pencil,' they heckled.

'I'm not mad,' she protested with anger. 'Get out of my head. Here'—she threw the blank paper on the ground—'write, write, you all write.'

'But you are the writer,' they pestered her. They were becoming hostile and vicious. The woman writer felt as if her head would burst.

She thought of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. She wondered if Woolf had had a village in her head.

She took to spending more time in bed with a crate of warm beer at the side. Her eyes were red from worry, not enough sleep and too much drink. She studied her face in a small hand-mirror, examining the lines on her forehead. They were deep and pronounced, lines she had not earned, even with the raising of children, writing several essays and poetry books, cleaning, cooking and caring for lovers. She gazed at all the books around her and became even more depressed.

Interrupted by the angry voices of the villagers, overwhelmed by the force of their voices, she surrendered her thoughts to them.

'Well, what are you going to write? We have ideas to give you.' The Black woman writer knew their ideas. They were not new, but she listened.

'Write about women in houses without electricity.'

'Write about the dangers of living in a police state.'

'Write about Third World issues.'

'Write about . . . about . . .'

'Stick to the real issues that face Black women writers.'

'Your sexuality is your personal business. We don't want to hear about it, and the forum doesn't want to know.'

They accused her of enjoying the luxury of being a lesbian in a decaying society, of forgetting about their problems.

She tried to negotiate with them. 'Listen, all I want is a clear head. I promise to write about your concerns.' But they disagreed. 'We gave you more than enough time, and you've produced nothing.' They insisted that they all write the paper. She was disturbed by their criticism. She would never complete the paper with so many demands. The Black woman writer was full of despair; she wanted to explain to the villagers, once again, that what made writing dangerous for her was who she was—Black/woman/lesbian/mother/worker. . . . But they would not let her continue. In angry, harsh voices they pounded her head. 'You want to talk about sexuality as a political issue? Villagers

are murdered every time they go out, our young people jailed and thrown out of schools.' Without success, she explained that she wanted to talk about all the dangers of writing. 'Have you ever heard of, read about lesbians in the Third World? They don't have the luxury of sitting down at an international forum and discussing this issue, so why should you?'

Her head blazed; her tiny, tight braids were like coals on fire. The villagers stayed in her head, shouting and laughing. She tried closing her eyes and massaging her forehead. With her eyes still closed, she eased her body onto the couch. Familiar footsteps sounded at the side of her head. Maddie appeared. 'All this shouting and hollering won't solve anything—it will only make us tired and enemies. We all have to live together in this village.' Not one villager joked about her two dresses, pants, and sweater. Not one villager had anything to say about the pencil stuck in her hair, a pencil she never used. Maddie spoke for a long time, putting the villagers to sleep.

The Black woman writer slept late, dreaming first of her grandparents' village and then of her lovers. Now Maddie's face came. She took Maddie's hand and they set out down the village streets, through the fields of wild flowers, dandelions, Easter lilies. Maddie took the pencil from her head and began to write. With Maddie beside her, she awoke in a bed of wild flowers, refreshed.

Neil Bissoondath b. 1955

TRINIDAD, WEST INDIES

'The only label that I am happy with,' says Neil Bissoondath, 'is that of "Canadian writer" . . . because it means everything and it means nothing, because it includes Rohinton Mistry, Margaret Atwood, Robertson Davies, Timothy Findley, Neil Bissoondath and M.G. Vassanji. It is such an open concept. There is no label, there is no stereotype to be attached to it any more. . . . And that makes that label comfortable.' Bissoondath's acceptance of the label 'Canadian' serves as the point of departure of his controversial book *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada* (1994), an excerpt from which appears below. A 'book of a somewhat pugnacious kind', as he says in an interview, it begins by declaring Bissoondath's 'complete independence of all political parties', or, as he puts it elsewhere, that he is 'an enemy of ideology of any kind, political, racial,

religious. All ideology depends on stereotypes, and human life is not so simple.' He acknowledges, and traces, his origins—'I was born a Trinidadian . . . But that was a long time ago. I am no longer Trinidadian. . . . I do not share the hopes, fears, joys and views of Trinidadians'—but, at the same time, he privileges his present: 'Nowhere [in Canada] have I felt myself a stranger. Alienation, expatriation, exile: they are just words to me now, not personal issues; they are intellectual concepts that fascinate me precisely because they are so distant.' Presenting his book as one that 'does not claim to be an objective examination of multiculturalism', Bissoondath attacks the Canadian federal policy and its various forms of implementation because they 'manipulate the ethnic communities'. As he says, 'multiculturalism constantly throws your ethnicity at you, thereby putting you at arm's

length from society at large.' Multiculturalism and such cultural events as the 'Writing Thru Race' conference, he argues, do not help eliminate discrimination. It is 'through effort, through work, through education' that 'Italians, or the Jews, or the Irish, or the Japanese . . . [who] suffered through a period of discrimination . . . made their way into the mainstream.' His vision of Canadian society, as he says in an interview, is one 'that from the beginning makes an attempt to be colour-blind'.

The descendent of indentured labourers from India, Bissoondath was born in Arima, Trinidad, and grew up in Sangre Grande before arriving in Toronto in 1973 to study at York University. After he graduated with a BA in French (1977), Bissoondath taught French and English as second languages while pursuing his writing. With the assistance of a Banff School of Fine Arts scholarship, he completed his first book, *Digging Up the Mountains* (1986), a collection of short fiction about immigrant characters from various ethnic backgrounds. *A Casual Brutality* (1988), Bissoondath's highly acclaimed novel, was the winner of the W.H. Smith-Books in Canada First Novel Award and a finalist for the Trillium Award. Its protagonist, Raj, an East Indian who arrives in Toronto as a foreign student but ends up taking residency, narrates his life story while he is on a return flight from his Caribbean island to Canada. Having lost a Canadian wife and their son to the racial violence that has torn his Caribbean

island apart, Raj shares Bissoondath's resistance to ethnicity and avoids any identification, including glances of recognition, with other Caribbeans in Toronto. This novel was followed by another collection of short fiction, *On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrow* (1990), also about various immigrants who lean for support on each other in their encounters with the Canadian system.

Bissoondath believes that 'writers have no social function. Writers have one function, and that is to tell a good story.' Yet his fiction revolves around many of the social problems that afflict immigrants. His second novel, *The Innocence of Age* (1992), shifts its focus from immigrants, who now appear only as secondary characters, to deal with the relationship between a father and a son. Written after his father's death, it is, as Bissoondath has described it, about 'people very different from myself, who have appropriated white, wasp faces'. Nevertheless, while his most recent novel, *Doing the Heart Good* (2002), which won the Hugh MacLennan Prize for Fiction, focuses on the reminiscences of Alistair MacKenzie—a lover of Dickens and sherry—the female protagonist in an earlier novel, *The Worlds Within Her* (1998), flies from Toronto to Trinidad to scatter her mother's ashes. Like other writers, Bissoondath does not want to be pigeonholed. Bissoondath, who lives in Quebec City, was the writer and host of a documentary about fathers and sons broadcast on CBC television.

from *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada*

The Uses of Ethnicity

The cult of ethnicity exaggerates differences, intensifies resentments and antagonisms, drives ever deeper the awful wedges between races and nationalities. The endgame is self-pity and self-ghettoization.

—Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Disuniting of America*

Some years ago, a book-promotion tour took me to Washington, DC, and to a radio studio where I was to be the guest on a phone-in show. The host and I chatted for a few minutes about my background, my novel, *A Casual Brutality*, and its themes of colonialism, immigration, and displacement. I fielded a few calls, answered a few

questions—and then I heard through the headphones a soft-spoken young woman calling in to set the historical record straight on the origins of people like myself, people historically and ethnically of India. Of herself she said only one thing, that she was black, and she went on to explain that Indians were a fairly recent invention, the result of a British plot to exterminate the black race not through genocide but through a kind of genetic breeding.

The land called India, she said, had not long ago been populated by Africans. Then one day the English arrived. They took a dislike to the Africans they found and instituted a policy of enforced copulation between Englishmen and black women, the goal being the overwhelming of the black genes by the white genes and, so, the eventual extermination of blacks. The black genes had proven resistant, though, and the rapes instead had produced the people we now call Indians. It was, she explained, the reason that Indians had dark skin with straight, black hair and facial features that appeared a blend of European and African.

I was speechless for a moment and then admitted my ignorance of this version of history—at which point the host's hand gestured a question at me and at my own gestured response, pressed a button for the next call.

Ethnicity is the classification of human beings by race, religion, language, cultural traditions and other traits held in common. Notions of ethnicity allow academics and social engineers to order, and so more easily study, the vicissitudes of the human race. They can, to a point, be useful.

Ethnicity, it must be noted, is not restricted to race alone. Just as 'whites' are not ethnics (but Danes, all of whom are white, are), so 'blacks' are not ethnics (but Jamaicans, most of whom are black, are). Nor can the black communities of Nova Scotia, people who have lived in this country for as long as the oldest white families, justifiably be considered 'ethnic' communities in the popular way—or can they? Moreover, 'ethnic' as a synonym for 'foreign' or 'exotic' or 'visible'—as in the term 'ethnic food'—is essentially meaningless. I think always with delight of a good acquaintance who, with his traditionally 'Canadian' demeanour, likes to complain tongue-in-cheek that he too should be considered an ethnic in view of his Danish heritage—but in the Canadian concept of ethnicity no one is willing to recognize him as such; he's too invisible, he fades into the landscape.

Such categorizations are not without their controversies. They allow the less stable among us to order the human race into ethnic hierarchies (with Jews and blacks usually competing for last place in the ranking of some; with whites in the cellar in the ranking of others). They lend a veneer of respectability to studies such as the one conducted by Professor Philippe Rushton some years ago on the supposed link between penis length and intelligence—a study that suggested that more is not necessarily better. (Guess which ethnic group turned out to be the best endowed and, thus, the least intelligent. Hint: the 'results' could be used to explain away the woes of much of the African continent.)

Further controversy arises when it comes to the ethnic/racial breakdown of crime statistics. In 1990, Metropolitan Toronto Police Sergeant Ben Eng broke force policy

by collating race and crime data to conclude that the vast majority of crime in the Oriental community was being committed by 'phoney refugees' from mainland China and Vietnam.¹ Sergeant Eng's approach was less than scientific—he simply drew conclusions from the names entered in arrest forms and daily occurrence sheets—and so his conclusions attracted a fair amount of outrage (although, tellingly, '30 groups in the Chinese community sprang to his defence'²).

Two problems in particular are troubling to opponents of this approach to crime statistics. The first is the question of the actual collection of data. As the head of the Metro Police Services Board, Susan Eng (no relation to the sergeant), asked how far such studies should pursue the racial breakdown: 'Are you a Jamaican black, an African black? Are you a Danish white? A Scottish white?'³ The second problem concerns the use that would be made of the statistics: would they simply be made the basis for official discrimination? As Judge David Cole, chair of the Commission on Systemic Racism in the Ontario Criminal Justice System, so succinctly stated it, 'People are torn between "The truth shall make you free" and "The numbers will be abused."' ⁴

Perhaps most importantly, though, few opponents subscribe to the belief that any evidence of a racial/ethnic component in crime and similar bias in the justice system would ever lead to the institution of concrete and positive measures, the only goal that could firmly justify the pursuit of such statistics. Antoni Shelton, executive director of the Urban Alliance on Race Relations, made what seems a remarkable statement in this regard: 'Statistics have an academic, not real-life, value and they have political impact on people's lives. . . . Stats won't dispel the myth that blacks are predisposed to crime. And proving in a lab with numbers that injustice exists won't create the will to do anything about it.'⁵

The statement is remarkable for this reason: if statistics of race and ethnicity carefully collected and collated can be used to ensure employment equity, why can they not be used to combat crime? Without the full picture, such policies and programs will always be inadequate—and we deny ourselves the full picture, it seems to me, by denying ourselves certain knowledge because of the fear of misuse.

And, even with the most complete data, even with the most careful and considered application of the results, there would undoubtedly be misuse. Statistics, we all know, are a tool of the devil, easily bent to serve any purpose. A finding of a high percentage of, say, Vietnamese or South Asians involved in criminal activity would surely be used by racists to justify calls for an active and official discrimination. Some abuse is inevitable—but while statistics cannot guarantee the political will necessary to bring about change, neither has fear of inevitable abuse ever prevented the statistical study of social problems and the institution of remedial programs as a result of the knowledge gained.

In the end, though, the larger context provides an uncomfortable perspective: refusing to collect such data is to be untrue to the selves that we claim. It is to allow

ethnic communities to have it both ways: to exist as officially protected, promoted, and enhanced entities and yet to remain in an important way untouchable, and so subject to abuse from both within and without. Could this explain the decision by at least thirty groups in the Chinese community to defend Sergeant Eng?

Ethnicity can be like a futon mattress; it can cushion and comfort, it can provide a safe and warm place—but the stuffing sometimes shifts, becomes lumpy and irksome, and the lumps must either be accepted or pounded out. Accepting the lumps makes for uneasy sleep. Too often, ethnic communities accept the uneasy sleep. Or, as novelist Joy Kogawa more elegantly put it: 'In an age when loneliness, malaise and an overwhelming bigness assail us, our ethnic communities are sometimes no more than bits of driftwood to which a few people cling in the midst of a typhoon. What we need are lifeboats. What we need is Noah's ark.'⁶

At the heart of multiculturalism bob these 'bits of driftwood': communities shaped by notions of ethnicity; more particularly, by a heightened sense of ethnicity; most particularly, by a heightened sense of their own ethnicity. They are, many of them, what the poet and professor Roy Miki, a Canadian of Japanese descent and a man with a powerful sense of historical grievance, has termed 'racialized'.

To be 'racialized' is to have acquired a racial vision of life, to have learnt to see oneself, one's past, present, and future, through the colour of one's own skin. It is not new—*Mein Kampf* hinges on a racial vision; apartheid could not have existed without a racial vision—but it is, in certain circles, acquiring a new respectability as old enemies grow to resemble each other. Nor is this as simple or as agreeable a proposition as it may appear. Ethnicity, race, and their permutations are peculiarly conducive to the spinning of fantasy, so that Christopher Columbus becomes merely the evil European who enslaves and massacres noble natives by conquering Paradise; so that the Toronto writer and social activist June Callwood is transformed into a racist; and so that the ethnic genesis of Indians is cast as yet one more nefarious colonial machination.

A sense of one's racial and cultural background, like a sense of one's personal likes and dislikes, is essential to an individual sense of self. Confusion over one's ethnicity, the desperate search for a personal centre and a meaning to one's life, leads to the kind of despair evident in the words of that young woman in Washington. It was clear that her view of history, as peculiar and as misinformed as it was, not only placed her in what was to her a satisfactory historical context, but it also offered the calming notion of herself as a victim of that history. It solidified the nebulous; it soothed the pain of drift. To see oneself in history rather than outside it, to see oneself as a victim of history rather than as one of its victimizers, is to confer on oneself a delicious sweet-and-sour confirmation of one's own existence: deliciously sweet because you cannot be denied; deliciously sour because you have been brutalized. This life you lead is not your fault.

But neither history nor race nor culture is destiny: human beings are saved from that by intelligence and the gift of irony. And it is the ironic eye, questioning, judging, that ultimately refuses to simplify.

1 Lynda Hurst, 'Colouring crime stats by race', *Toronto Star*, 27 November 1993.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Joy Kogawa, in *Cultures and Writers: A Cultural Dialogue of Ethnic Writers*, ed. Yvonne Grabowski, in *The Dictionary of Canadian Quotations*, ed. John Robert Colombo (Toronto: Stoddart, 1991).

Nor does ethnicity guarantee anything in a complex world. Samuel Selvon,⁷ Bharati Mukherjee,⁸ Rohinton Mistry,⁹ Hanif Kureishi,¹⁰ and I are all writers, all of the same 'ethnicity' to a certain extent, all ethnically 'South Asians', all 'Indians'. Yet I suspect that, as a group, we are at least as dissimilar as similar. Selvon and I were both born in Trinidad, but of different generations and with lives that have followed very different paths to different cities in the same country. Mukherjee, born in Calcutta, found Canada an unhappy place and has built a more satisfying life in the United States. Mistry and I both moved to Toronto from elsewhere and share the experience (with many others) of living and writing in that city. Kureishi, born in England of Indian parents, lives in London: we met once, shook hands, found we had little to say to each other.

Each of these people and I can claim a certain similarity, but we must also acknowledge vastly different contexts, contexts that have shaped personalities sufficiently dissimilar to render the ethnic category, beyond certain superficialities, essentially useless. Selvon remained a Trinidadian all his life. A few years ago, when he was in his mid-sixties and had long been considered a cornerstone of West Indian literature, he said to me, 'People keep asking me when I'm going to write my Canadian novel. Man, I'm still dealing with things that happened in my childhood.' Kureishi, in manner and imagination, is nothing if not British. Mukherjee has embraced the exuberance of America, while I prefer the quieter pleasures of Canada.

When we meet, it is not as fellow ethnics sharing unspoken similarities. There is no gravitation around an ethnic bonfire. These are writers whose work I cherish—just as I cherish the work of Kazuo Ishiguro or Ian McEwan or John Irving. I feel a greater affinity for the work of Timothy Mo—a British novelist born of an English mother and a Chinese father—than I do for that of Salman Rushdie, with whom I share an ethnicity. Like those of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Rushdie's fictions are alien to me. Ethnically, Mo and I share nothing, but imaginatively we share much. In Mo's fictional worlds, as in those of the Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa, I recognize aspects of myself. As Salman Rushdie once wrote of a similar 'community' elsewhere: 'England's Indian writers are by no means all the same type of animal. Some of us, for instance, are Pakistani. Others Bangladeshi. Others West, or East, or even South African. And V.S. Naipaul, by now, is something else entirely. This word "Indian" is getting to be a pretty scattered concept.'¹¹ Scattered, I would venture, to the point of near meaninglessness.

This diversity within the same 'ethnic group' is a growing reality in Vancouver, where the 'Chinese community' numbers 250,000. It can easily appear monolithic, and yet there are tensions brewing both within the community itself and between the

community and others. Raymond Chan, an MP from Richmond, BC, and secretary of state for Asian-Pacific Affairs, has pointed out the diversity within the community. 'Don't look at them as a block,'¹² he has cautioned.

And a block they are not. A clear illustration of this is provided by Shue Tuck Wong, a geography professor at Simon Fraser University.¹³ One day, his daughter, a grade nine student, called him a 'banana'. She explained that other Chinese students, recent arrivals from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China, had called her a banana—yellow on the outside, white on the inside—'because I cannot speak or write Chinese'.

A banana: not, then, a real Chinese. It is evidence of arrogance, of a vision informed by notions of racial and ethnic purity. And it was within this context that Professor Wong advised his daughter to respond: 'Tell them back that you are a Canadian. If there is anyone who calls you a banana, he must be a racist. It's important you should be recognized on the basis of who you are, rather than what language you speak.'

Jim Kwong, a police-community liaison officer who moved from Hong Kong in 1991, offers the 'general impression . . . that many Chinese Canadians who were born here and speak only English prefer to mix with the Canadian mainstream rather than the Chinese community.'¹⁴ But language choices are not the only source of division. Business competition is stiff and political disagreements profound. Raymond Chan has alienated many in the Chinese community by organizing protests against the human-rights record of the Beijing government.

Professor Wong is a pragmatic man, a man not blinded by sentimentality: 'Learning Chinese is very useful if you are going to make your living in an area that speaks Chinese,' he said. 'But if you are living in a non-Chinese environment, it's more important to have a good command of the language where you live.'¹⁵ It is evidence that Professor Wong has a firm grasp not only on who he is but also on where he is. It is evidence of great personal integrity.

Mr Chan, who was born in Hong Kong and emigrated to Canada at the age of seventeen, claims no ethnic political base for himself, explaining that part of his motivation in running for office was 'to show that even without the support of the [Chinese] establishment, I have the support of the people. I am a Canadian.'¹⁶ In the world of multiculturalism, it is a courageous admission.

My point is simple, but it is one usually ignored by multiculturalism and its purveyors—for to recognize the complexity of ethnicity, to acknowledge the wild variance within ethnic groups, would be to render multiculturalism and its aims absurd. The individuals who form a group, the 'ethnics' who create a community, are frequently people of vastly varying composition. Shared ethnicity does not entail unanimity of vision. If the individual is not to be betrayed, a larger humanity must prevail over the narrowness of ethnicity.

7 Trinidad-born novelist (*A Brighter Sun*, *The Lonely Londoners*); lived for many years in London before moving to Calgary. He died suddenly in April 1994, while on a visit to Trinidad. He was 71.

8 Novelist (*The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife, Jasmine*) and short-story writer (*Darkness*, *The Middleman*, and *Other Stories*, which won the 1988 [US] National Book Critics Circle Award).

9 Short-story writer (*Tales from Firozsha Baag*) and novelist (*Such a Long Journey*, which won numerous prizes including the Governor General's Award).

10 Screenwriter (*My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Sahmy and Rosie Get Laid*) and novelist (*The Buddha of Suburbia*).

11 Salman Rushdie, 'Imaginary Homelands', in *Imaginary Homelands*, Granta Books in association with Penguin Books, 1991, 16–17.

12 Robert Matas, 'Minister loathes ethnic politics', *The Globe and Mail*, 8 January 1994.

13 Robert Matas, 'A "banana" split in Vancouver', *The Globe and Mail*, 25 February 1994.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

To preserve, enhance and promote the 'multicultural heritage' of Canada, multiculturalism must work against forces more insistent than any government policy. If a larger humanity does not at first prevail, time and circumstance will inevitably ensure that it ultimately does.

When I was in my early teens and already interested in a writing career, I ran into a problem not unfamiliar to every would-be writer: What was I to write about? I soon decided that I, a Trinidadian of East Indian descent (or extraction, as we used to say, making it sound appropriately wrenching), was destined, maybe doomed, to write pastoral stories of dhotied, cow-owning, cane-cutting Hindu peasants in dusty central Trinidad villages.

This was a tall order and the cause of some despair, since I neither knew nor had ever seen any Hindu peasants in dusty Trinidad villages. Having grown up in a modern suburb of Port of Spain to the sounds of Motown, I didn't know whether they even existed. And yet, it seemed to me, I had to tell the story—even if it meant creating it from pure imagination—of an entire community, my community, ethnically inherited, of turbans and woodfires and huts of packed mud and thatch.

This belief, limiting and quickly jettisoned, came from the earnestness of ambition swathed in an idea of race and religion, an idea, finally, of belonging.

Community and belonging: they are at the heart of every immigrant dilemma. In the contentious introduction to her 1985 short story collection *Darkness*, Bharati Mukherjee writes: 'In my fiction, and in my Canadian experience, "immigrants" were lost souls, put upon and pathetic. Expatriates, on the other hand, knew all too well who and what they were, and what foul fate had befallen them.'¹⁷ Ms Mukherjee saw herself as an expatriate, and she began to write of characters equally self-aware, engaging an irony she describes, unflinchingly, as 'mordant and self-protective': 'Irony promised both detachment from and superiority over, those well-bred post-colonials much like myself, adrift in the new world, wondering if they would ever belong.'¹⁸ And then she adds a paragraph that neatly delineates one of the great themes of so-called 'immigrant' literature: 'If you have to wonder [whether you will ever belong], if you keep looking for signs, if you wait—surrendering little bits of a reluctant self every year, clutching the souvenirs of an ever-retreating past—you'll never belong, anywhere.'¹⁹

Mukherjee looked forward (and not backward) to an idea of immigrant perfection, since found in the United States. It is an idea so alien to the Canadian approach that this country, 'hostile to its citizens who had been born in hot, moist continents like Asia',²⁰ could not help but seem darker than it probably was at the time.

This wondering, this looking for signs, this failure to belong takes many forms. It is sometimes sad and enervating, sometimes exuberant and colourful. It is always unsettling.

17 Bharati Mukherjee, *Darkness* (Toronto: Penguin, 1985), 1–2.

18 *Ibid.*, 2.

19 *Ibid.*

20 Mukherjee, *Darkness*, 2.

In his novel *No New Land*,²¹ M.G. Vassanji explores this theme—a particularly tragic aspect of the immigrant experience—through the story of a man named Nurdin Lalani, his friends, family, and community of Muslim Indians exiled to Toronto by the racial politics of Africa.

Vassanji offers a remarkable portrait of the teeming and almost self-sufficient community that has established itself in a large apartment building in the Don Mills section of Toronto. He captures its past and its present, its ambitions and its intrigues, the sounds of its conversations and the smells of its foods: a little society hectic with activity behind tightly closed doors.

Its members make perilous sorties out into the wider society only when they must, usually for work. And who can blame them? For it seems that Toronto offers little beyond humiliation and danger, corruptive peep-shows and physical violence lurking around every corner. When the well-meaning but hapless Nurdin tries to lend a helping hand to a woman in distress, he ends up being charged with indecent assault—merely a pretext for blackmail, it turns out, since the complainant is easily bought off. Even the immigrant haven of Kensington Market holds unholy temptations for Nurdin when he comes close to having an affair with a widowed childhood friend he happens to run into. As a character in another novel by another writer—Nazruddin in V.S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*—says about ethnic attitudes in Canada: 'The thing about some of those ethnic groups over there is that they don't like moving around too much. They just want to go home as fast as they can and stay there.'²²

The Canadians encountered—all whites, in fact, including a German *fräulein* in Tanganyika who slaps Nurdin's father when his admiring glances grow too frank—reveal a distinct lack of goodwill: any warmth they may display is merely camouflage for their attempts to fleece the newcomers. Only a Montreal immigration officer is friendly, but then his genial 'Welcome to Canada' costs him nothing.

These people are, it is clear, Mukherjee's immigrants, put-upon and pathetic. Bitter-sweet descriptions of Dar es Salaam offer a nostalgic vision of the past and make the present seem even darker than it really is, emphasizing the central point that there are, as the title states, no new lands, only new circumstances.

No New Land is a novel, and the community it examines is fictional. But it is fiction based on reality. Such buildings and neighbourhoods are to be found in most major cities of Canada, pockets of ethnicity we choose to honour, as Toronto has done, by erecting street signs in the ethnic language most prevalent. It makes for the appearance of tolerance and, like the park signs asking visitors to PLEASE WALK ON THE GRASS, good tourist photographs. But Vassanji's description of this community of exiles—so tight, so self-contained, so alienated from the mainstream—is that of an almost classic ghetto. It is not an extreme of multiculturalism but its ideal: a way of life transported whole, a little outpost of exoticism preserved and protected.

And yet one can detect vital changes in the younger generation. Nurdin's teenaged children, for instance, speak a language different from that of their parents, their

21 Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd, 1992.

22 V.S. Naipaul, *A Bend in the River* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 236.

attitudes—when compared to the young Nurdin in *Dar es Salaam*—are more independent. The inevitable change, both generational and experiential, is a challenge to the parents—Nurdin interprets his daughter's impatience as a growing hatred of her origins—but the children, it is clear, are leaving behind the ghetto of the mind, their horizons different; Canada for them, unlike for their parents, is indeed a new land. Yasmín, a secondary character, has already found this freedom in the United States, displaying what Mukherjee characterizes as 'a movement away from the aloofness of expatriation, to the exuberance of immigration'.

If the undeniable ghettoization is bad news for the purveyors of multiculturalism, so too is this uneasy but equally undeniable distancing of the next generation. These children, and their children after them, will in all likelihood shrug off the restraints of ethnicity. They will acquire friends of various backgrounds who share their experience, some of them will intermarry, and most if not all will blend into the mainstream of the society around them, itself already irrevocably changed. They will, in a word, integrate.

Despite the attractions of the past, the changes wrought by immigration and radically different circumstances must be recognized, assimilated and accepted. It is the only way to get on with one's life, the only way to take full advantage of the new possibilities. It is a reality multiculturalism, with its obsessively backward gaze, fails to recognize. Immigration is essentially about renewal. It is unjust, to individuals and to the communities from which they emerge, to require it to be about stasis. To do so is to legitimize marginalization; it is to turn ethnic communities into museums or exoticism.

Marilyn Dumont *b.* 1955

OLDS, ALBERTA

Of Cree and Métis origins, Marilyn Dumont has been writing since 1985. Widely anthologized, she won the Gerald Lampert Memorial Award for her first collection of poetry, *A Really Good Brown Girl* (1996), and both the Stephan G. Stephansson Award in Alberta and the Alberta Book Award for Poetry for her second collection, *green girl dreams Mountains* (2001). Her poetry, in her own words, is 'certainly writing back to the history that [she] learned, but it is also a way of creating a new history too'. This 'new history' derives in part from her 'own urban experience', an experience often sideline by the 'traditional' accounts of Native life many readers expect Aboriginal writing to reflect. While Dumont is not 'arguing that native' culture is dying and that [traditional] symbols do not exist

within the full integrity of the living culture', she is interested in capturing the 'continuum of exposure to traditional experience in native culture', a continuum that includes 'the experience of the urban native': 'The urban native who participates in all the trappings of a wage economy as best he/she is able to. The urban native who is increasingly becoming the majority.' As many of her poems illustrate, 'the urban native experience' reveals that 'internalized colonialism is alive and well,' on the one hand, and 'that there is a connection between domination and representation', on the other. A 'misconception' she is interested in dispelling concerns the assumption that she may be 'deficient in [her] Nativeness' because she 'didn't grow up with an actual story'. 'This is really screwed up,' she says, 'because . . .

if it's an oral tradition, I'm not going to come away with stories that I can narrate as if I had read them in a library.'

Born in Olds, in northeastern Alberta, Dumont—a descendent of Métis leader Gabriel Dumont—studied at the University of Alberta, earning a diploma in Social Work and a BA in

English, and at the University of British Columbia, where she obtained an MFA. In addition to her work as a radio and television broadcaster, and her video production work with the National Film Board, she has taught creative writing at Simon Fraser University, Kwantlin College, and the University of Alberta.

Letter To Sir John A. MacDonald

Dear John: I'm still here and halfbreed,
after all these years
you're dead, funny thing,
that railway you wanted so badly,
there was talk a year ago
of shutting it down
and part of it was shut down,
the dayliner at least,
'from sea to shining sea,'
and you know, John,
after all that shuffling us around to suit the settlers,
we're still here and Metis.

We're still here
after Meech Lake and
one no-good-for-nothin-Indian
holdin-up-the-train,
stalling the 'Cabin syllables /Nouns of settlement,
/ . . . steel syntax [and] /The long sentence of its exploitation'¹
and John, that goddamned railroad never made this a great nation,
cause the railway shut down
and this country is still quarreling over unity,
and Riel is dead
but he just keeps coming back
in all the Bill Wilsons yet to speak out of turn or favour
because you know as well as I
that we were railroaded
by some steel tracks that didn't last
and some settlers who wouldn't settle
and it's funny we're still here and callin ourselves halfbreed.

1 E.R. Scott, 'Laurentian Shield'.