

# OTHER SOLITUDES

CANADIAN  
MULTICULTURAL  
FICTIONS

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Yes, so easily that maybe it's a response to something very basic inside all of us.

*Perhaps it's a need to feel superior in some way?*

Yes, but if you have something to feel really good about, something genuine, whatever the reason, then you wouldn't have to rely on artificial or spurious reasons of race and colour.

*But the economic and political climate now in Canada isn't conducive to the promotion of fairness and equality among people, is it?*

I think that, even if there were no multiculturalism policy, people who are against it would find other reasons for speaking out against those of other backgrounds. Perhaps the multiculturalism concept is offering those bigots and racists a sounding board—at worst, it's doing that. At best, it could be in some way spreading the message that all races, all cultures are to be respected. That's what the goal is and by constantly reiterating it, the bigots and racists are told that it is not fashionable to be very open about racism, that we do not look upon it kindly. So, it keeps a lid on and we do not have the sort of blatancy that is seen in the States. But perhaps that's equally bad—or worse—because it transforms those tendencies in Canada into something more subtle, something more difficult to identify.

DIONNE BRAND b. 1953

### *Blossom*

Priestess of Oya, Goddess of winds, storms and waterfalls

Blossom's was jumping tonight. Oya and Shango and God and spirit and ordinary people was chanting and singing and jumping the place down. Blossom's was a obeah house and speakeasy on Vaughan Road. People didn't come for the cheap liquor Blossom sell, though as night wear on, on any given night, Blossom, in she waters, would tilt the bottle a little in your favour. No, it wasn't the cheap liquor, even if you could drink it all night long till morning. It was the feel of the place. The cheap light revolving over the bar, the red shag covering the wall against which Blossom always sit, a line of beer, along the window-sill behind, as long as she ample arms spread out over the back of a wooden bench. And, the candles glowing bright on the shrine of Oya, Blossom's mother Goddess.

This was Blossom's most successful endeavour since coming to Canada. Every once in a while, under she breath, she curse the day she come to Toronto from Oropuche, Trinidad. But nothing, not even snarky white people could keep Blossom under. When she first come it was to babysit some snot-nosed children on Oriole Parkway. She did meet a man, in a club on Henry Street in Port-of-Spain, who promise she to take care of she, if she ever was in Toronto. When Blossom reach, the man disappear and through the one other person she know in Toronto she get the work on Oriole.

Well Blossom decide long that she did never mean for this kinda work, steady cleaning up after white people, and that is when she decide to take a course in secretarial at night. Is there she meet Peg and Betty, who she did know from home, and Fancy Girl. And for two good years they all try to type; but their heart wasn't in it. So they switch to carpentry and upholstering. Fancy Girl swear that they could make a good business because she father was a joiner and white people was paying a lot of money for old-looking furniture. They all went along with this until Peg say she need to make some fast money because, where they was going to find white people who

like old furniture, and who was going to buy old furniture from Black women anyway. That is when Fancy Girl come up with the pyramid scheme.

They was to put everybody name on a piece of paper, everybody was to find five people to put on the list and that five would find five and so on. Everybody on the list would send the first person one hundred dollars. In the end everybody was to get thousands of dollars in the mail and only invest one hundred, unless the pyramid break. Fancy Girl name was first and so the pyramid start. Lo and behold, Fancy Girl leave town saying she going to Montreal for a weekend and it was the last they ever see she. The pyramid bust up and they discover that Fancy Girl pick up ten thousand dollars clean. Blossom had to hide for months from people on the pyramid and she swear to Peg that, if she every see Fancy Girl Munroe again, dog eat she supper.

Well now is five years since Blossom in Canada and nothing ain't breaking. She leave the people on Oriole for some others on Balmoral. The white man boss-man was a doctor. Since the day she reach, he eyeing she, eyeing she. Blossom just mark this down in she head and making sure she ain't in no room alone with he. Now one day, it so happen that she in the basement doing the washing and who come down there but he, playing like if he looking for something. She watching him from the corner of she eye and, sure as the day, he make a grab for she. Blossom know a few things, so she grab on to he little finger and start to squeeze it back till he face change all colour from white to black and he had to scream out. Blossom sheself start to scream like all hell, until the wife and children run downstairs too.

It ain't have cuss, Blossom ain't cuss that day. The wife face red and shame and then she start to watch Blossom cut eye. Well look at my cross nah Lord, Blossom think, here this dog trying to abuse me and she watching *me* cut eye! Me! a church-going woman! A craziness fly up in Blossom head and she start to go mad on them in the house. She flinging things left right and centre and cussing big word. Blossom fly right off the handle, until they send for the police for Blossom. She didn't care. They couldn't make she hush. It don't have no dignity in white man feeling you up! So she cuss out the police too, when they come, and tell them to serve and protect she, like they supposed to do and lock up the so-and-so. The doctor keep saying to the police, 'Oh this is so embarrassing. She's crazy, she's

crazy.' And Blossom tell him, 'You ain't see crazy yet.' She run and dash all the people clothes in the swimming pool and shouting, 'Make me a weapon in thine hand, oh Lord!' Blossom grab on to the doctor neck, dragging him, to drown him. It take two police to unlatch Blossom from the man red neck, yes. And how the police get Blossom to leave is a wonder; but she wouldn't leave without she pay, and in cash money too besides, she tell them. Anyhow, the police get Blossom to leave the house; and they must be 'fraid Blossom too, so they let she off down the street and tell she to go home.

The next day Blossom show up on Balmoral with a placard saying the Dr So-and-So was a white rapist; and Peg and Betty bring a Black Power flag and the three of them parade in front of that man house whole day. Well is now this doctor know that he mess with the wrong woman, because when he reach home that evening, Blossom and Peg and Betty bang on he car, singing, 'We Shall Not be Moved' and chanting, 'Doctor So-and-So is a Rapist'. They reach into the car and, well, rough up the doctor—grabbing he tie and threatening to cut off he balls. Not a soul ain't come outside, but you never see so much drapes and curtain moving and swaying up and down Balmoral. Police come again, but they tell Doctor So-and-So that the sidewalk is public property and as long as Blossom and them keep moving they wasn't committing no crime. Well, when they hear that, Blossom and them start to laugh and clap and sing 'We Shall Overcome'. That night, at Peg house, they laugh and they eat and they drink and dance and laugh more, remembering the doctor face when they was banging on he car. The next day Blossom hear from the Guyanese girl working next door that the whole family on Balmoral, Doctor, wife, children, cat, and dog, gone to Florida.

After that, Blossom decide to do day work here and day work there, so that no white man would be over she and she was figuring on a way to save money to do she own business.

Blossom start up with Victor one night in a dance. It ain't have no reason that she could say why she hook up with him except that in a dance one night, before Fancy Girl take off, when Peg and Betty and Fancy Girl was in they dance days, she suddenly look around and all three was jack up in a corner with some man. They was grinding down the Trinidad Club and there was Blossom, alone at the table, playing she was groovin' to the music.

Alone. Well, keeping up sheself, working, working and keeping

the spirits up in this cold place all the time . . . Is not until all of a sudden one moment, you does see yourself. Something tell she to stop and witness the scene. And then Blossom decide to get a man. All she girl pals had one, and Blossom decide to get one too. It sadden she a little to see she riding partners all off to the side so. After all, every weekend they used to fête and insult man when they come to ask them to dance. They would fête all night in the middle of the floor and get tight on southern comfort. Then they would hobble down the steps out of the club on Church or 'Room at the Top', high heels squeezing and waist in pain, and hail a taxi home to one house or the other. By the time the taxi reach wherever they was going, shoes would be in hand and stockings off and a lot of groaning and description of foot pain would hit the door. And comparing notes on which man look so good and which man had a hard on, they would cook, bake, and salt fish, in the morning and laugh about the night before. If is one thing with Blossom, Peg and Betty and Fancy Girl, they like to have a good time. The world didn't mean for sorrow; and suffering don't suit nobody face, Blossom say.

So when she see girl-days done and everybody else straighten up and get man, Blossom decide to get a man too. The first, first man that pass Blossom eyes after deciding was Victor and Blossom decide on him. It wasn't the first man Blossom had, but it was the first one she decide to keep. It ain't have no special reason either; is just when Victor appear, Blossom get a idea to fall in love. Well, then start a long line of misery the likes of which Blossom never see before and never intend to see again. The only reason that the misery last so long is because Blossom was a stubborn woman and when she decide something, she decide. It wasn't even that Blossom really like Victor because whenever she sit down to count he attributes, the man was really lacking in kindness and had a streak of meanness when it come to woman. But she figure like and love not the same thing. So Blossom married to Victor that same summer, in the Pentecostal Church. Victor wanted to live together, but Blossom say she wouldn't be able to go to church no more if she living in sin and if Victor want any honey from she, it have to be with God blessing.

The wedding night, Victor disappear. He show up in a dance, in he white wedding suit and Blossom ain't see him till Monday morning. So Blossom take a sign from this and start to watch Victor because she wasn't a hasty woman by nature. He come when he want, he go when he want and vex when she ain't there. He don't

bring much money. Blossom still working day work and every night of the week Victor have friends over drinking Blossom liquor. But Blossom love Victor, so she put up with this type of behaviour for a good few years; because love supposed to be hard and if it ain't hard, it ain't sweet, they say. You have to bear with man, she mother used to say, and besides, Blossom couldn't grudge Victor he good time. Living wasn't just for slaving and it seem that in this society the harder you work, the less you have. Judge not lest ye be judged; this sermon Blossom would give to Peg and Betty anytime they contradict Victor. And anyway, Blossom have she desires and Victor have more than reputation between he legs.

So life go on as it supposed to go on, until Blossom decide not to go to work one day. That time, they was living on Vaughan Road and Blossom wake up feeling like a old woman. Just tired. Something tell she to stay home and figure out she life; because a thirty-six year old woman shouldn't feel so old and tired. She look at she face in the mirror and figure that she look like a old woman too. Ten years she here now, and nothing shaking, just getting older and older, watching white people live. She, sheself living underneath all the time. She didn't even feel like living with Victor anymore. All the sugar gone outa the thing. Victor had one scheme after another, poor thing. Everything gone a little sour.

She was looking out the window, toward the bus stop on Vaughan Road, thinking this. Looking at people going to work like they does do every morning. It make she even more tired to watch them. Today she was supposed to go to a house on Roselawn. Three bathrooms to clean, two living rooms, basement, laundry—God knows what else. Fifty dollars. She look at she short fingers, still water-laden from the day before, then look at the bus stop again. No, no. Not today. Not this woman. In the bedroom, she watch Victor lying in the bed, face peaceful as ever, young like a baby. Passing into the kitchen shaking she head, she think, 'Victor you ain't ready for the Lord yet.'

Blossom must be was sitting at the kitchen table for a hour or so when Victor get up. She hear him bathe, dress and come out to the kitchen. 'Ah, ah, you still here? Is ten o'clock you know!' She didn't answer. 'Girl, you ain't going to work today, or what?' She didn't answer. 'You is a happy woman yes, Blossom. Anyway,' as he put he coat on, 'I have to meet a fella.' Something just fly up in Blossom head and she reach for the bread knife on the table. 'Victor, just go and don't come back, you hear me?' waving the knife. 'Girl you crazy

or what?' Victor edged toward the door, 'What happen to you this morning?'

Next thing Blossom know, she running Victor down Vaughan Road screaming and waving the bread knife. She hear somebody screaming loud, loud. At first she didn't know who it is, and is then she realize that the scream was coming from she and she couldn't stop it. She dress in she nightie alone and screaming in the middle of the road. So it went on and on and on until it turn into cry and Blossom just cry and cry and cry and then she start to walk. That day Blossom walk. And walk and cry, until she was so exhausted that she find she way home and went to sleep.

She wake up the next morning, feeling shaky and something like spiritual. She was frightened, in case the crying come back again. The apartment was empty. She had the feeling that she was holding she body around she heart, holding sheself together, tight, tight. She get dressed and went to the Pentecostal Church where she get married and sit there till evening.

For two weeks this is all Blossom do. As soon as she feel the crying welling up inside she and turning to a scream, she get dressed and go to the Pentecost. After two weeks, another feeling come; one as if Blossom dip she whole head in water and come up gasping. She heart would pump fast as if she going to die and then the feeling, washed and gasping. During these weeks she could drink nothing but water. When she try to eat bread, something reach inside of she throat and spit it out. Two weeks more and Blossom hair turn white all over. Then she start to speak in tongues that she didn't ever learn, but she understand. At night, in Blossom cry dreams, she feel sheself flying round the earth and raging around the world and then, not just this earth, but earth deep in the blackness beyond sky. There, sky become further than sky and further than dream. She dream so much farther than she ever go in a dream, that she was awake. Blossom see volcano erupt and mountain fall down two feet away and she ain't get touch. She come to the place where legahoo and lajabless is not even dog and where soucouyant, the fireball, burn up in the bigger fire of an infinite sun, where none of the ordinary spirit Blossom know is nothing. She come to the place where pestilence mount good, good heart and good heart bust for joy. The place bright one minute and dark the next. The place big one minute, so big Blossom standing in a hole and the blackness rising up like long shafts above she and widening out into a yellow and red desert as far as she could see; the place small, next minute, as a pin head and

only Blossom heart what shrink small, small, small, could fit in the world of it. Then she feel as if she don't have no hand, no foot and she don't need them. Sometimes, she crawling like mapeeppee snake; sometimes she walking tall, tall, like a moco jumbie through desert and darkness, desert and darkness, upside down and sideways.

In the mornings, Blossom feel she body beating up and breaking up on a hard mud ground and she, weeping as if she mourning and as if somebody borning. And talking in tongues, the tongues saying the name, Oya. The name sound through Blossom into every layer of she skin, she flesh—like sugar and seasoning. Blossom body come hard like steel and supple like water, when she say Oya. Oya. This Oya was a big spirit Blossom know from home.

One night, Oya hold Blossom and bring she through the most terrifying dream in she life. In the dream, Oya make Blossom look at Black people suffering. The face of Black people suffering was so old and hoary that Blossom nearly dead. And is so she vomit. She skin wither under Suffering look; and she feel hungry and thirsty as nobody ever feel before. Pain dry out Blossom soul, until it turn to nothing. Blossom so 'fraid she dead that she takes she last ball of spit, and stone Suffering. Suffering jump up so fast and grab the stone, Blossom shocked, because she did think Suffering was decrepit. Then Suffering head for Blossom with such a speed that Blossom fingernails and hairs fall out. Blossom start to dry away, and melt away, until it only had one grain of she left. And Suffering still descending. Blossom scream for Oya and Oya didn't come and Suffering keep coming. Blossom was never a woman to stop, even before she start to dream. So she roll and dance she grain-self into a hate so hard, she chisel sheself into a sharp hot prickle and fly in Suffering face. Suffering howl like a beast and back back. Blossom spin and chew on that nut of hate, right in Suffering eyeball. The more Blossom spin and dance, the more Suffering back back; the more Suffering back back, the bigger Blossom get, until Blossom was Oya with she warrior knife, advancing. In the cold light of Suffering, with Oya hot and advancing, Suffering slam a door and disappear. Blossom climb into Oya lovely womb of strength and fearlessness. Full of joy when Oya show she the warrior dance where heart and blood burst open. Freeness, Oya call that dance; and the colour of the dance was red and it was a dance to dance high up in the air. In this dance Oya had such a sweet laugh, it make she black skin shake and it full up Blossom and shake she too.

Each night Blossom grow more into Oya. Blossom singing, singing for Oya to come,

'Oya arriwo Oya, Oya arriwo Oya, Oya kauako arriwo, Arripiti O Oya.'

Each night Blossom learn a new piece of Oya and finally, it come to she. She had the power to see and the power to fight; she had the power to feel pain and the power to heal. For life was nothing as it could be taken away any minute; what was earthly was fleeting; what could be done was joy and it have no beauty in suffering.

'Oya O Ologbo O de, Ma yak ba Ma Who! leh, Oya O Ologo O de, Ma yak ba Ma Who! leh, Oya Oh de arriwo, Oya Oh de cumale.'

From that day, Blossom dress in yellow and red from head to foot, the colour of joy and the colour of war against suffering. She head wrap in a long yellow cloth; she body wrap in red. She become a obeah woman, spiritual mother and priestess of Oya, Yuroba Goddess-warrior of winds, storms, and waterfalls. It was Oya who run Victor out and it was Oya who plague the doctor and laugh and drink afterwards. It was Oya who well up the tears inside Blossom and who spit the bread out of Blossom mouth.

Quite here, Oya did search for Blossom. Quite here, she find she.

Black people on Vaughan Road recognized Blossom as gifted and powerful by she carriage and the fierce look in she eyes. She fill she rooms with compelling powder and reliance smoke, drink rum and spit it in the corners, for the spirits who would enter Blossom obeah house in the night. Little by little people begin to find out that Blossom was the priestess of Oya, the Goddess. Is through Oya, that Blossom reach prosperity.

'Oya arriwo Oya, Oya arriwo Oya, Oya kauako arriwo, Arripiti O Oya'

Each night Oya would enter Blossom, rumbling and violent like thunder and chant heroically and dance, slowly and majestically, she warrior dance against suffering. To see Oya dancing on one leg all night, a calabash holding a candle on she head, was to see beauty. She fierce warrior face frighten unbelievers. Then she would drink nothing but good liquor, blowing mouthfuls on the gathering, granting favours to the believers for an offering.

The offerings come fast and plentiful. Where people was desperate, Blossom, as Oya, received food as offering, boxes of candles and sweet oil. Blossom send to Trinidad for calabash gourds and herbs for healing, guided by Oya in the mixing and administering.

When Oya enter Blossom, she talk in old African tongues and she

body was part water and part tree. Oya thrash about taking Blossom body up to the ceiling and right through the walls. Oya knife slash the gullets of white men and Oya pitch the world around itself. Some nights, she voice sound as if it was coming from a deep well; and some nights, only if you had the power to hear air, could you listen to Oya.

Blossom fame as a obeah woman spread all over, but only among those who had to know. Those who see the hoary face of Suffering and feel he vibrant slap could come to dance with Oya — Oya freeness dance.

'Oya O Ologbo O de, Ma yak ba Ma Who! leh, Oya O Ologo O de, Ma yak ba Ma Who! leh, Oya Oh de arriwo, Oya Oh de cumale.'

Since Oya reach, Blossom live peaceful. Is so, Blossom start in the speakeasy business. In the day time, Blossom sleep, exhausted and full of Oya warrior dance and laughing. She would wake up in the afternoon to prepare the shrine for Oya entrance.

On the nights that Oya didn't come, Blossom sell liquor and wait for she, sitting against the window.



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*You've lived in Canada for many years — in fact, since you were*

*seventeen. In your first years here, what were the positive as well as the negative aspects of being an immigrant?*

Basically, I really didn't think of myself as an immigrant *per se*. Yes, I came from another country, but I didn't think that the worlds were that far apart, and I knew that the problems that I would have would not stem from my being an immigrant, but would stem from my being black. If I had been white, within a generation my family would have been assimilated. I could escape being an immigrant, but along with the black people who have lived in this country for three centuries, I would not escape my race at any point. Racism was the focus of my encounter with Canada, not immigration.

*In your short story 'Blossom' there is a definite feeling of separateness between black and white. Indeed, there is a distrust and hatred of whites. Can you comment on Blossom's alienation and her refusal to assimilate?*

I think that Blossom's distrust of whites is not based on some personal craziness of hers. It's based on historical practice. It is based on historical events which place her as a black woman in the world at this point in time. Her distrust of whites is not personal paranoia: it has something to do with the social conditions that she finds herself in. She finds herself in a city of whites, where her relation to them is one of subordination. She works for them; they exploit her labour through her race; they oppress her through sexual harassment. The whites in the story are not Blossom's only antagonists, though whites might read the story that way. Blossom also frees herself of an exploiting husband. What Blossom hates is suffering and the suffering of black peoples.

*Is there something in 'Blossom' that is universal?*

I'm sure there might be, but when I start to write a story, I never begin from what might be universal. In fact, I'm wary of appeals to universality. It seems to me that only works written by writers who are not white are called upon to prove or provide universality. White literature is never called upon to commit itself in this way, but all other literature must abandon its specific projects to fit into the understanding of white literature as the expression of white sensibilities. White critics have a preoccupation with rationalizing, homogenizing meanings into white cultural codes which are, of course, loaded

with historical relations of power. Universal, therefore, means white. In that context, I do not care about what is universal. I write about what is specific.

*Despite the fact that you've lived in Canada for years, would you say that your racial background has affected your writing in Canada?*

Yes. I've heard other writers talk about being on the margins of Canadian writing. I find myself in the middle of black writing. I'm in the centre of black writing, and those are the sensibilities that I check to figure out something that's truthful. I write out of a literature, a genre, a tradition, and that tradition is the tradition of black writing. And whether that black writing comes from the United States as African American writing or African Caribbean writing or African writing from the continent, it's in that tradition that I work. I grew up under a colonial system of education, where I read English literature, and I liked it because I love words. But within that writing, there was never my presence. I was absent from that writing. That writing was predicated on imperial history and imperial aspirations — British or American. That imperial history included black slavery. It included the decimation of native peoples. And if the literature nurtured on this is presented to you as great art and you are absent, or the forms or shapes in which you are included are derided, then you know that this literature means to erase you or to kill you. Then you write yourself.

*In 'Blossom' it seems to me that the past is alive in an almost mystical way.*

Yes, each time I write, I find that I've got to go back. I have to go back five hundred years to come back again. Blossom had to go back to come back again to make everything beautiful, to understand anything about the world that she was living in. She had to dig into that past of hers which she retained; she becomes an Obeah woman because that was one of the things that black people in the Americas managed to retain, some sense of a past that is not a past controlled by those things that seem to control her now. I think that one of the reasons why we have been able to survive in the Americas, as a people, has been because of what we have been able to hold and preserve. You just have to look at black culture today and, despite the real hardship that we continue to suffer, you also have to look

at things like the music that we make or the literature that we write. So, there is an antagonistic discourse that we continually engage in—in order to keep alive.

*Of course, there are anti-discriminatory laws, but it seems as if there is no real spirit behind those laws.*

It's also not even individual; it's within institutions. I came here in 1970 and went to find a job. I talked on the phone to the person about the job, and the guy was very enthusiastic on the phone. And I went there and I saw consternation on his face—and the job wasn't there. When I got back home, I called and the job was there. Every black person can tell you a similar story.

*What does this do to you? What kind of effect does it have?*

Personally, you have to develop an armour to deal with it. Collectively, what you do is organize against it. Because, you see, you can't deal with racism on your own—because you will go crazy. What you do is what black communities have done since we landed on these shores.

*But how do you change people's minds, their hearts?*

I don't think it's up to black people to change white sensibilities. I think it is up to white people to do that. I think that racism is not our problem. I think it's a white problem. I think we can fight against it. I think it's our job to fight for good laws, to fight for equality, but in terms of doing things like changing white attitudes, white people have to do that work.

*For you as a writer, has multiculturalism—as an official Canadian policy—had any benefits, or any detrimental effects?*

I think what it does essentially is to compartmentalize us into little cultural groups who have dances and different foods and Caribana. But it doesn't address real power.

*Real power?*

Real power—which is economic power and political power. I think multiculturalism makes the Canadian population think they're doing really nice things: isn't it nice that we can accept 'these' people? But

'these' people remain 'these' people. You know, I've been living in this country for twenty years. I am sure there's a guy who emigrated from England five years ago who feels more of this country than I. And I'm sure that there's a black person who has lived here for 150 years and feels like me.

*What effect does this kind of segregation have on people in the arts?*

It has never stopped us from writing or playing music or singing. I think for a lot of black artists it's a question of survival, the survival of a culture. So we cannot really depend on the Canada Council or the Ontario Arts Council or the Ministry of Multiculturalism. The black community cannot depend upon, cannot trust these institutions to maintain or nurture our cultural expression in Canada. Those institutions should be asking themselves what it is precisely that they maintain and nurture, if particular communities are not funded or are underfunded. And they should be asking themselves: what is Canadian culture? There are other literary organizations in this country, such as the Writers' Union and PEN, who seem to feel that you can quantify culture into six per cent of this and two per cent of that. These demographic figures are trotted out in hasty self-defence to deny charges of racism. This approach assumes that the contradictions of Canadian culture can be handled by putting them into discrete and isolated packages. Further, it assumes the ongoing dominance of white culture as justifiable and having no responsibility to change its fundamental stance.

*But it must make people alien or angry or bitter?*

Not really, because, you see, these institutions are a reflection of the culture in which we live. So that it's not something that only happens to us when we write to the Arts Council or the Canada Council. It's something that has happened to us every day on the street. So we're really wise about these things, because they've been happening for years and years and years.

*I noticed that in 'Blossom' you portrayed two distinct worlds, the world of the whites and the world of the non-whites. Is this your sense of the divisions within Canadian society?*

Of course. It isn't just my sense. There are reservations in this country; there are job ghettos for people of colour. And yes, those



things have been marked out by institutions that have grown out of the building of this nation. In the end, we're all responsible for changing that.

*How difficult is it to avoid the potential danger of stereotyping a racial group in order to show cultural differences?*

Fundamentally, I work against stereotyping. My writing is directed against stereotypes and so I am bound to show complexity in the characters I produce. I am not trying to 'show cultural differences' in my writing; I am not even trying to portray a 'racial group'. What you read into the text so far as that is concerned depends on your stance, your location. The question presumes a reader who is located somewhere else. The white reader may perceive cultural difference, but I am merely writing myself.

*Couldn't there also be a danger in showing black men and women as always being the victims of prejudice?*

Danger for whom? Racism is a fact in our lives and it is not in our interest to pretend that it does not exist. But that fact has never overwhelmed us and it is certainly not all that we live or all that I write about. I don't think that there's any more danger in it for me, in trying to look at black life, my life, than there was for James Joyce in looking at Irish life.

*It seems to me that there's a great deal of anger in Blossom's life. Do you see this as being a force in her transformation?*

But she also has a buoyancy. She never thinks of dying. Her anger moves her. You can be angry about silences and injustice. Those are pretty good things to be angry about. And if that anger can then move you, I think it's the real answer. In this culture, one tends to think that anger is destructive. Anger is not an emotion that's only distinguished by destructiveness. To me, it's a more complex emotion. In fact, Blossom is one of the least angry of my characters. She is a woman of mighty resilience and quick action. And this brings me to another point. I'm also wary of the word 'anger' as a description for every emotion of a black character in a black work. White critics tend to describe black emotion as either angry or sad, no matter what else is going on in the text, no matter how many other emotions they are confronted by in the characters in that text. Blossom is also

joyful, resigned, peaceful, excited, fearful, confused, hurt, sexual, remorseful, euphoric. . . . But the cultural codes which the critic uses to identify black characters are white cultural codes which see blacks in general as either angry in general or sad in general!

*What do you see as the future for Canadian writers who are not white?*

I think that we are probably the new wave of Canadian writing. Twenty years ago there was a national wave of Canadian writing which set itself up against American writing and the deluge of American culture in Canada. We are the new wave of Canadian writing. We will write about the internal contradictions.

*What do you think about whites who write about native life?*

I think I can say categorically that whites cannot write about native life.

*Should not?*

Should not. Yes, should not and cannot—not at this point in history at any rate, not in the absence of native writers having the opportunity, the possibility, and the material resources for writing about native life and having that work published and read. History has been weighted against native people in this country and weighted toward whites; this is an obvious truth for native writers. Native peoples do not need white writers to interpret their lives for them. The distortions of native life in interpretations by white writers are far too numerous and destructive to mention. If any white writer feels that he has the right to interpret native life, the shame of those distortions should make him pause, blush, and halt in his tracks. No amount of liberal good will can erase this. If anything, white writers should ponder what in their collective psyche makes them want to write about native life. Why do they need the power to do this? Why do they remain in a past of white conquest and appropriation? Why are they bent on perpetuating stereotypes, instead of breaking with that history? Now, that would make some good reading, but it would take a little more work and thinking.