

# U.S./Canadian Writers' Perspectives On The Multiculturalism Debate

A Round-Table Discussion  
at Harvard University

**Panel Contributions by Clark Blaise,  
Nicole Brossard, George Elliott Clarke,  
Paul Yee; Response by Geeta Patel**

## **Graham Huggan**

In 1993, a special issue of *Time* magazine entitled “The New Face of America: How Immigrants Are Shaping the World’s First Multicultural Society” (141.21 [Fall 1993]) celebrated the United States as the world’s foremost multicultural nation. Canadian(ist) hackles were duly raised, but it wasn’t until June 1997 that the plan that Winfried Siemerling and I had both discussed at length eventually came to fruition. The plan, in brief, was to invite creative writers from both sides of the border to discuss similarities and differences in the so-called “multiculturalism debates.” Multiculturalism, of course, has been a favourite—some might say even clichéd—topic in North American academic discourse for the past several years. We thought something might be added by providing a forum for creative writers, most of them Canadian but several living, or with experience of living, in the United States; many of them dividing their time between their writing and academic duties; all of them with hands-on knowledge of the North American culture industries that increasingly support yet still might be seen, paradoxically, as disfavoured writers from ethnic minority backgrounds. These writers, we felt sure, would draw on a wealth of practical experience, as well as commenting on “multiculturalism” as a wide discursive field. They would tease out contradictions in contemporary multicultural policies, locating both the blind spots in (liberal) pluralist agendas

and the reciprocal hardness of hearing that often seems to affect both U.S. and Canadian sides of the debates. The broader questions we had both considered would no doubt be given an airing: *Whose* multiculturalism, and for which reasons? In whose interests is the term now being used, and how has it been used historically? Is multiculturalism, as Charles Taylor has argued, a “politics of recognition,” an institutionalized celebration of cultural diversity and difference? Or should it be seen more critically as a form of commodified eclecticism, or as a smokescreen that hides and protects the values of the dominant culture? Is multiculturalism dependent on the racialization of ethnic difference? To what extent is multiculturalism a sanctioned form of intercultural tolerance, to what degree an opportunity for the fetishistic marketing of cultural Otherness? And what does the term really mean, if anything, to creative writers? To writers who are conscious, maybe, of their *national* affiliation, but also of their regional—or *transnational*—ethnic-group allegiance? These were the general questions, then, we hoped to put on the table; in addition, we asked our panelists to consider more specific issues: the sense they might have, for example, of their own cultural affiliation; their own perception of the multiculturalism debates from either side (or both sides) of the US/Canadian border; the relevance of such debates to the writing—not least, their own writing—process; and the way perceptions of multiculturalism affect who *reads* particular writers, affect who *writes* for particular readers, affect what *reception* writers get.

The responses, transcribed as follows, more than matched our expectations.<sup>1</sup> At once analytical and inventive, the writers succeeded, not in “solving” problems but, as Clark Blaise suggested at the beginning of his talk, in posing more interesting ones. We would like to thank them all for their spirited participation. Whatever doubts—and there were many—that arose out of our round-table discussions, the Harvard symposium proved to be a stimulating (multi)cultural event.<sup>2</sup>

### **Winfried Siemerling**

#### *North American Multiculturalisms / Introduction*

The multiculturalisms in Canada and the United States have very different genealogies; and inside the Canadian nation-state, the situation is again different in Quebec. Multiculturalism has been linked to questions of nationhood directly but in quite opposite ways in Canada and the United States.

In both cases, not only the identity of the nation, but also its survival often appear to be at stake. According to United States conservative and even sometimes not-so-conservative opinion, multiculturalism threatens to destroy the nation. Canadian multiculturalism, by contrast, is supposed to save the nation (or at least the nation-state), and this by liberal and conservative consensus. A conservative government was in power when multiculturalism became law in 1988.

To a certain degree, Canadian multiculturalism extends a policy of biculturalism and bilingualism that was officially initiated to accommodate French difference; others have seen it as an attempt to silence Quebec nationalism. For thorny questions of similar dimensions, of course, Canada relies on Royal Commissions. The Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism in the sixties promoted not only formal recognition of French and English, but also of the contribution of other ethnic groups and what the Commission called their “collective will to exist” (7). While bilingualism and biculturalism thus helped to open the door for multiculturalism as administrative policy, support for multicultural agendas was sometimes also motivated by resistance to bicultural and francophone claims. Some commentators have seen the inauguration of Canadian multiculturalism as a partially successful attempt, for example, to appease the resistance to bilingualism and special status for Quebec that was heard from the Prairie provinces, regions with significant proportions of Northern and Eastern European settlers (Davey). Other assessments have critiqued the policy for potentially reinforcing essentialized identities (Kamboureli “Of Black Angels”; “Technology”) and thus cultural segregation, which runs counter to its goal of increased intergroup contact (stated for instance in sections 3[1]g and 5[1]c of Bill C-93, the Canadian Multiculturalism Act). In literary studies, postcolonial criticism in particular has suspected multicultural discourses of camouflaging asymmetrical power relationships of cultural difference (Bennett, Gunew), and the policy has been accused not only of diverting attention from problems of class, but also of conflating issues of ethnicity in general with those of visible minorities and race (Bannerji, Philip). It has been observed that, at least during the 1970s and even part of the 1980s, Canadian multiculturalism was largely white (Davey). In the Royal Commission documents of the 60s, for instance the word “race” referred to English and French descent. Only subsequently did questions of race (in a non-linguistic sense) and of gender begin to have an impact on discourses

of multiculturalism. In a sense, then, there are several different strands of multiculturalism besides official multiculturalism, and they meet in various constellations. Yet while different regional and cultural locations have motivated a considerable variety of responses, it is nonetheless clear that linguistic difference has played a substantial role in the inception of Canadian multiculturalism, and it has continued to do so in its later development.<sup>3</sup>

In the United States, despite the conspicuous presence of Spanish and of other languages, the question of linguistic difference has received surprisingly little attention in this context; linguistic difference appears for instance rarely as an issue in the 1994 Blackwell multiculturalism reader (Goldberg). Werner Sollors, one of the directors of the innovative *LOWINUS* project on non-English literatures “in what is Now the United States,” rightly claims: “Language is the blind spot in the debates about multiculturalism in the United States” (Sollors “Multilingual Turn”). Prior to such very recent developments, one of the most visible discussions of linguistic difference has taken place in the area of the vernacular in black culture, highlighted for instance in the parallels and differences between the positions of Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates. But the generally low profile of questions of language in the United States multiculturalism debate points to a different political genealogy in a country where the issue of race, rather than of linguistic difference, set the stage for multiculturalism. In the partial melting of the melting pot, neo-ethnic identifications here were modelled on the more radical positions that developed out of the civil rights movement since the 1950s in terms of race and later often in alliance with feminisms (Fisher 242, Showalter).

While there seem to be now many convergences between the multiculturalism discussions in Canada and the United States, political connotations in both countries thus differ to some extent because of different historical contexts in which multiculturalism emerged. In the United States, multiculturalism has had a relatively recent history. As opposed to terms like “cultural pluralism,” which has been traced to Horace Kallen in 1924 (Sollors “Critique”), or the somewhat more recently circulated term “ethnicity,” discourses of and about “multiculturalism” arrived in American debates only about a decade ago and in contexts often linked to university education, if one thinks of the 1988 Stanford curriculum debate and a number of anti-multicultural books around that time. Although related questions were negotiated in the early phases of the canon debates from the late 1970s on (Jan Gorak points to Fiedler and Baker 1979), there are, it appears, no references

to multiculturalism in United States newspapers before 1989; they increase rapidly and steadily from then on until 1994, and reach a plateau or even begin to level off thereafter (Glazer 7). The term multiculturalism thus arrives late in the United States if compared with Canada; it has from the beginning more activist if usually monolingual agendas; and it appears from the beginning often as the bogeyman in conservative political opinion.

As Francesco Loriggio has observed, in Canada the combination of adjectives like “resistant” or “insurgent” with the word “multiculturalism” is much less likely than it is in the United States (Loriggio 191-92). With multiculturalism a Canadian administrative policy since 1971 and a law since 1988, intellectuals in Canada—as in Australia, as Sneja Gunew points out—sit on government advisory boards, which leaves them sometimes in ambivalent positions (Gunew 16). A version of multiculturalism is authorized in Canada as official reason by the nation-state, while it is also sometimes criticized as segregationist social technology that maintains static separations; as Smaro Kamboureli says:

Thou shalt be ethnic, our legislators say; thou shalt honour thy mother tongue; thou shalt celebrate thy difference in folk festivals; and thou shalt receive monies to write about thy difference (providing thou art a member of an ethnic organization that sponsors thy application). And we have responded to that call, ethnics and non-ethnics alike; we have responded by discovering that difference is sexy. (“Of Black Angels” 146)

In Quebec, of course, multiculturalism is often not seen as “insurgent” at all, but rather equated with Canadian federal policy in opposition to Quebec sovereignty. Nonetheless, Hubert Aquin wrote as early as 1962 of an internally poly-ethnic French-Canadian culture (Aquin); and instead of discussing multiculturalism, some writers and critics such as Pierre Nepveu or Sherry Simon now offer transcultural or translational views of Québécois literature in order to account for a French-language-based but polyethnic internal Québécois diversity.

*The Canadian Model in the United States: Role Model or Warning?*

American and Canadian cultures sometimes have been seen as alternatives or as complementary myths—for instance by Northrop Frye or in Sacvan Bercovitch’s account of his border-crossing experience in *The Rites of Assent* (Frye, Bercovitch 1-28). Other border-crossers have diagnosed a time lag in the cultural emergence of Canada when compared with the United States (for example, Peter Dale Scott). For some observers, however, Canada

seems almost ahead: for them, it is a postmodern nation without a heavy ideology of identity (Kroetsch) or, precisely, an officially multicultural nation since the seventies.

Canadian multiculturalism seems to be perceived in the United States—if it is noted at all—either as role model or as warning. For the likes of Arthur Schlesinger, Canada stands for the dangers of a weak national identity that can lead to a country's break-up (Schlesinger 11). For Brook Thomas in a 1997 MELUS paper, on the other hand, Canada's multiculturalism would demonstrate that the model is feasible, and thus can accommodate both the nation and other cultural concerns. But to use a supposedly given "Canadian multiculturalism" as a cipher of feasibility in the United States seems to evade the question of what kind of multiculturalism one would want. Canada has actually several multiculturalisms, official and unofficial ones, with possibly more to come. And the question of linguistic difference, which is still important in many current editions of the Canadian model, will probably not play the same role soon in the United States.

What are the relationships between this business of national culture (which still seems to frame many discussions of multiculturalism) and affiliations of gender, race, and ethnicity, affiliations that cut across the nation, even the postcolonial nation, and often across national languages like French or English? And what kind of a role do any of these affiliations play not just for literature as an institution but in the process of writing itself? Some writers and critics of course claim that political affiliation and literature do not mix at all. But let us turn to our panelists for more specific answers, and in particular for more comments that are specifically concerned with the situation of writing. Some of the aspects we suggested to the panelists for potential consideration concerned their specific cultural affiliations as writers; their perception of the multiculturalism debates in Canada and/or the United States; the relevance of these questions to the writing process; the issues of dual or multiple audience and of cross-cultural encounter in the text; and, finally, the question of reception in this context.

### **Clark Blaise**

In general terms, I agree with Winfried's first statement that multiculturalism in the two countries derives from very different sources—linguistic and ethnic differences in Canada and racial differences in the United States—and

I would also suggest that multiculturalism is part of a process of obfuscation and disguise. I'll try to make that clear; but remember, writers don't ever solve problems, they only pose more interesting problems, or else they offer metaphors—and that's what I'm going to do right now. Simon Schama, the ex-Harvard historian and art critic, once said in *Landscape and Memory*, “unstable identities are history's prey.” That's the invocation I've taken for this autobiographical story, because I think “unstable identities” are “preying” at the moment on Canada.

*It's 1950, I'm ten, staying with my parents in my maternal grandparents' two-room finished attic in Winnipeg. In my room, the ceiling slants and a waisthigh door opens to a crawl space where thirty years of magazines have been neatly bundled. Reader's Digest from the beginning, when it had a different name, Maclean's, Saturday Evening Post, National Geographic, Colliers, Look, Punch. Everything in the house is neatly filed. Everything in Canada seems worth filing, my family knows everyone, is related to everything, three generations have attended the University, ever since it was founded. My great-grandfather was the chief carpenter of the Houses of Parliament. The word first naturally attaches itself to my mother's family. The Canadian dollar is mightiest currency in the world outside of the British pound, but just go down to Grand Forks and see what the Yanks will give you.*

*We may have been living on charity, my parents unemployed and fleeing failure in the States, we may be sneaking down a narrow staircase to use the bathroom, my father reduced to smoking Players, not his beloved Herbert Tarytons, next to a cracked-open window in the Manitoba winter, but I do not doubt that my mother's large, extended family in Winnipeg, rule; my uncle is television's storyteller-weatherman, he heads the Wheat Pool and Ducks Unlimited, his dozens of self-illustrated books about the Assiniboine Valley are the models for my own drawing. My aunt heads the University of Manitoba's Board of Regents, the Red Cross, and the Liberal Party. Federal and provincial leaders are in and out of their house, just three doors down Wolseley Drive from us. There is no maple leaf flag yet, no constitution, we rule by, and take our bearings from, parliamentary consensus, not by litigious squabbling. We are British North Americans, the repository of culture, civility and peaceableness.*

*In my fifth grade class, the names are peculiarly Manitoban: my closest friend is Cam Shephard (you could stock two hockey teams with boys named Campbell, or Lorne or Brian or Hart with last names starting with “Mac,” or*

with Sutherlands and Frasers), there's Hart Devany, Big Wayne Van Horne, and Marv Thorlaksson. There are vowel slurs starting and ending in "K" with j's and y's and w's scattered for effect: the teacher never calls on them, they never volunteer, we pity and fear them, they'll take their revenge on the ice, the Ukrainians. We're not in the North End, there are no Jews. There are the smart, beautiful girls, Valery Kenny, whose aunt is the Australian nurse Sister Kenny, she of the hot blankets for polio treatment. Frytha Magnusdottir, the Sigurdjonsson girls. Whenever I mention their names, my mother, grandmother, cousins or aunts will say, "Icelandic girls are very smart and very pretty. But they age quickly. At forty you wouldn't recognize them." At ten, I wasn't thinking thirty years into the future.

Marv Thorlaksson and I are walking home for lunch—an hour and a half break in the day, no lunch rooms in Canadian schools back then, the social implications of such a policy clear to me only years later—and we hear piped music and amplified voices from inside a crowd of fur-hatted, fur-coated women. Passionate oratory, we push closer. There's no election that I know of (and I'm close enough to the levers of power in Manitoba to at least know when one is coming). "Icelanders," sniffs Marv. And he's right, of course, it's an Icelandic election being run on Canadian soil, since there are more eligible Icelandic voters in Manitoba than in Reykjavik, and they're allowed to vote till their Icelandic genes are deemed diluted. (I don't know if similar situations ever applied in the United States. Were the large Italian or Scandinavian or German populations courted and permitted to vote in their Old Country elections?)

My grandparents' house is run by my grandmother, just learning, at seventy or so, to sneak a cigarette and a nip of apricot brandy when her husband is napping. She bakes the bread and pies. My unmarried youngest aunt, nearly thirty years my mother's junior, raises parakeets, does the heavy work. My grandfather, one of Canada's grand old men, a pioneer in many fields, is still alive, still strong and vigorous, still a tyrant, and utterly disconnected to any reality. If he catches me, or my father alone in his house, he'll shout, "Sneaks, burglars!" and attempt to thrash us. Now, what is wrong with the portrait? In this scene of almost blissful Canadian tranquility, what is the one jarring note?

The out-of-place element is my French-speaking, Quebec-born father. He belongs less than five miles away in a city called St. Boniface, the largest French centre on the prairies on the other side of the Red River from Winnipeg where the street signs are French, the mayor is French, the schools are Catholic and French. There he can drink and smoke, tell stories, and flirt. It would be wrong



*to think of St. Boniface as just a quaint appendage to the much-larger Winnipeg; it is an extrusion of the other Canada, the one that writes its language on cereal boxes, makes its appearance on the postage stamps and currency, who votes faithfully Liberal and is rewarded with alternating Prime Ministers, but otherwise keeps a measured distance from the prosperous and confident goings-on of plaid-wearing, shortcake-eating, bee-raising, wheat-cultivating, United-Church-going Winnipeg.*

*Cut now to a scene one or two years earlier, in Lake County, Florida, part of the "Cracker Belt" of north-central Florida, sheriff-ruled, segregated, impoverished, fish-thick, moss-dense, parasite-infested, mucky, gatory, pious and ignorant. This is the county, in 1994, that would pass a Christian Coalition-mandated guideline of "superiority of American culture" for its schools to follow. My parents have brought me here. It's a Canadian thing, especially a French-Canadian thing, to get to Florida. Good things happen if you escape the punishing cold, the darkness of the Quebec soul for which the winter is but a convenient symbol. But we've fallen short of paradise by about two hundred miles, there's still an annoying little winter here, there's no ocean, only forest and lake, sand and swamp, and the worm-infested, belly-protruding, rib-counting poverty that my father had known in his childhood, but that my mother had never even imagined on this continent. I am seven, then eight, then nine: Florida and its bundle of prejudices are all I know of a home state, all I know of a serviceable accent. Neither of my parents can be understood by the locals.*

*We are barely above the lowest level of white trash, although my mother is a college graduate and European-trained artist. This is a curious immigration indeed; perhaps no one has ever traced this precise path. We live in a shack on stilts above a semi-permanent swamp, like the moss-pickers who are my only friends. Their names are Dowdy, Davis, Scoffield, Standridge, Stewart. They are the southeastern branch of Appalachian and midwestern tenant farmer stock, those red-cheeked, razor-scraped, washed-denim-blue-eyed Okies, Steinbeck's Joads, Raymond Carver's woodworking Arkansas father who went to the lumber mills of Oregon. They hunt, fish, drink, sleep, abuse one another, fornicate; they speak a dialect out of the seventeenth century where all verbs are strong, the subjunctive makes frequent but unpredictable appearances and pronouns are inflected. Their mortality rates are as high as any other undeveloped, tropical community's.*

*My mother and I are in the nearest town, Leesburg. This is where I go to school from the shack eight miles away where the bus picks me up. To my*

*teacher who is my mother's friend, I am something of a phenomenon. I wear shoes. I can read, write, draw and compute. The class of seven- and eight-year-olds contains some fifteen- and eighteen-year-olds, many with the small heads and soupbowl haircuts, the obesity and rolling gaits, the half-buttoned dresses, the toilet habits, the self-exposure, the violence and corrosive ignorance of the Southern Gothic. One morning my mother and I are in Leesburg, at a diner. I look out the window in sudden terror. My mother whirls around. I'm terrified, crying.*

*There in front of us, not ten feet from the window, a white woman in a broad straw hat is surrounded by Negro men, looking relaxed and talking to them. My mother often does the same, in her straightforward Canadian way, but not to men on the street, only to the old women whom she offers to guide across the street, or to go into stores for, in case there's something they want to buy or to see, since they are not permitted to enter. But she never looks as relaxed as this lady doing it. And why am I crying? Obviously I am a southern boy, I am a Cracker despite my mother's deep encoding; I don't want to see the men suddenly killed for their indiscretion, or the woman run out of town. I am crying because I've seen something I know to be terrifying, the same way children cry on their first airplane ride. Something, literally, obscene is happening. Something here is against the grain of nature, I've ingested the codes of Jim Crow, and although I do not think I would ever employ them offensively, that is, joining in schoolboy chants, using the dread language, I also know them to be landmines, step on one and you are automatically dead.*

*"It's alright, darling," she says, "I think she's a colored woman too." I learned a new word that morning, "albino" pronounced in the British way, to cover the sheer anomaly of it all, a white black woman, I never forgot it. A contradiction in the universe, an exception to the rules of survival and safe conduct had opened up.*

Two memories of stable, pre-modern identities, naive and twisted, innocent and dark. My memories of Canada are Ozzie and Harriet-American, bright and uncomplicated. My memories of America belong in the Third World, murky with racial violence, poverty, rigid, almost ossified social classes. One life that has not yet run its active course can still remember how it was.

It may seem strange to say so, at a time when the United States is the world's unchallenged superpower, whose icons of culture, marketing and political management have been adopted world-wide as models of

enlightenment and prosperity, and when Canada, long established as one of the world's most progressive and civilized countries, indeed, whose principal city has recently been named the world's most habitable city, but it bears emphasis: both countries have failed in their fundamental philosophical missions.

And it is that failure which today inflects their immigration and so-called multicultural policies. In fact, immigration is a secondary issue in both countries, but because it is secondary, and relatively uninvested by powerful domestic blocks, it is a safe target for disaffected citizens and demagogic leaders. It attracts more hostile attention to itself than the underlying failures which remain untreated, and barely attended.

By its very nature, the immigrant pool is an exploitable resource. Immigrants have no vote, they are admitted on the basis of the country's need, they arrive and survive on the host country's sufferance. The immigrant, in traditional American mythology, arrived as larva, was given a few hard years of benign neglect to transform himself, and emerged (or at least his children did) as red, white and blue butterflies.

The failures of the two countries could hardly be more striking to outside as well as native observers. Canada has never solved its French-English duality, America its black-white inequality. These realities stand in open condemnation of each country's prime mission: in the case of Canada, to extend the civilization of parliamentary (not individual-based) democracy; for the United States, to create a land of equal opportunity for all. For those reasons, until recently, Canada has been comparatively race-blind, America largely linguistically deaf. For that reason, Jackie Robinson in 1946 was the toast of Montreal; no one raised the race issue. Isaiah Thomas even today, as the first black pro basketball owner, says Canadian journalists ask him about the economic picture of the Toronto Raptor franchise; Americans about being the first black man in a white position. MaliVai Washington, when he won some tennis championships a year ago, was hounded with "Arthur Ashe's shadow" questions, when the nature of his game was Ashe's precise opposite (and his relatively untutored response was considered somehow insulting to Ashe's memory); similarly, of course, Tiger Woods is carrying the "Black Golfer" burden, and his relative indifference to questions of race is perceived as arrogance.

These are some salient images that I wanted to put on the table to reinforce in general terms what Winfried said earlier about the origins of multi-

culturalism in the two countries, and to show how very different they are, and how recalcitrant they're likely to be, because we're not facing the fundamental questions.

### **Nicole Brossard**

I would like to begin my talk by opening five little windows.

#### *First window*

I think of the poet Bernard Heidsieck performing a long poem called *Vaduz*. For half an hour, he recites the names of peoples, nations, and tribes from the past and the present. By the end of his reading, you feel very small. No matter where you come from you know for sure that it all amounts to an overwhelming insight: "I come and go; we come and go."

#### *Second window*

In his book, *Jihad vs. McWorld*, Benjamin R. Barber tells the story of a young couple from Sarajevo called Romeo and Juliet by the international press. He was Croat, she was Bosnian. They were killed by a Serb sniper. Barber shows the irony of people getting killed and killing each other in the name of culture and territory when all of them are wearing multinational running shoes and a multinational pair of jeans, symbols of a new economic world slashing into millions of lives like the future.

#### *Third window*

Last week I saw a wonderful play written by a Russian author. I read a book of poems by a Greek lesbian. I read the novel of a gay, sado-masochist Japanese, and read the diary of a physically challenged Mexican artist. Should I say I had a multicultural week with Maxim Gorky, Sappho, Mishima, Frida Kahlo? This week I am going to read Maryse Condé, Dionne Brand, Chrystos, Assia Djebar, and Anne-Marie Alonzo.

#### *Fourth window*

This is an excerpt from a long poem I wrote after The Fourth Feminist Book Fair, which took place in Barcelona in 1990. On the last evening of the Fair, four hundred women coming from different countries gathered to celebrate with food, music and wine in the beautiful Labyrinth Park. As it had happened previously in huge conferences on feminism, I had been trying to understand why women seem to spend more time and energy defending the

male politics of their respective countries than to defend their own rights.  
From *La Nuit verte du Parc Labyrinthe*<sup>4</sup>

(the ability to bypass the word country

We are all born young between a woman's legs. We are also born young in a country where the males sow women with repetition and tradition. Each one of us loves a country and knows that every war is hateful.

the country that enters into us through the senses, music and colours, is a country that is shared like the memory of fruit, seasons, heat, rain and storm winds. The country that enters into us through history and its violence is a country that divides us in memory of the pride of the conquerors and the pain of the conquered. The country that enters into us through the mouths of men of law is a country that denies our rights. The country that enters into us through the face of God and his heroes is a country that brings us to our knees. The country that enters into us through the language and tongue of a lover is a country that unites us. The country that enters into us through the beauty of trees, the fragrance of flowers and the shared night is a country that transforms us. The country that enters into us through male politics is a country that divides us. The country that enters into us like dreaming into life is a country that invents itself.

is there then a single country that is not an affair of vestiges and nostalgia? Sometimes, I wonder. My love, speak to me in the tongue of the unsubjected. The full hour that leaves us without country prolongs our lesbian lives.)

*Fifth window*

This last window is a question: "How many cultural differences are there between your mother and yourself? She loves you and you love her, but how many different layers of values are there between her and you?"

\* \* \*

That being said, the first comment I would like to make is how much I was surprised to be invited to participate in this panel. I have never thought of myself as belonging to one of the numerous ethnic communities living in Canada. I am a Québécoise as others are Canadian or American. I feel

trapped in the two hundred and thirty years of mourning after the Conquest, which turned into an historical process that slowly but surely will erase those who once called themselves “Canadiens,” then “Canadiens-français,” and now “Québécois.” Quebec culture is now very much alive and quite creative. But, in a way, we are still living on the high of the wonderful turbulence and exciting challenge of the 1970s. It is difficult for me to relate to multiculturalism because I cannot help seeing multiculturalism as a tactic invented by Pierre Elliott Trudeau when he was Prime Minister of Canada in order to avoid dealing with Quebec difference and the legitimacy of the project of a sovereign Quebec—not to mention also how useful it was for re-election purposes in order to obtain the ethnic vote.

Naturally, I know there is more to multiculturalism than what I have already said. Multiculturalism is a reality. It is a reality of diversity that can be a source of tension and conflict, as well as of creativity and discovery. But it is also about values and “comforts.” It is about comforts in the sense that it is always easier for everyone to get into a familiar environment. It is always more difficult to be creative in an unfamiliar environment. It also has to do with values, but I will come back to that aspect later on. It seems to me that multiculturalism has developed more around fighting racism and discrimination than around the advancement of specific ethnic traditions. It also seems to me that it was strategically used by racial minorities as a means to be included in the cultural and political life of the country, to be listened to and respected, as well as to develop their communities.

The fact that multiculturalism had an impact on the reception of my work never crossed my mind. But now I realize it might. I never thought I could be called a “Daughter of the British Empire” or a “Postcolonial Subject,” but historically, I am. In Quebec, in fact, the debate on colonization and its effects took place in the 1960s. This debate drove intellectuals and part of the population to the conclusion that in order to conquer economic, linguistic, and cultural autonomy—in other words, to de-colonize ourselves—the creation of an independent Quebec was the most appropriate solution. Albert Memmi’s *Portrait du colonisé* and Frantz Fanon’s *Les Damnés de la terre* have had an enormous influence on Quebec intellectuals, particularly for the understanding of what it means to be colonized through language, which is to say what it means to interiorize, to make your own, values and prejudices which are degrading the group you belong to. As Dionne Brand has discussed, such writers as Aimé Césaire and Léopold

Sédar Senghor were sources of inspiration for many nationalist poets in Quebec, not to mention Gaston Miron, who in order to illustrate how forced bilingualism could make you schizophrenic, was always asking when leaving Montreal: “Which direction do I take? Do I take the bridge or *le pont*?”

One of the topics suggested for this panel addressed the questions of a multiple audience and of other forms of cross-cultural encounters in the text. In my writing, it is not so much a matter of addressing an audience, but a matter of addressing questions which are vital to me. I would say that from 1965 to 1975 my audience was mainly composed of poets and post-modern writers. Then with books like *Lovhers*, *Picture Theory*, and *The Aerial Letter*, came an audience of women and lesbians. The postmodern audience remains, yet both audiences are discontented. Women say, “Why does it have to be so hard to read?” while men say, “Do you really have to be so radical in your feminist thoughts?” Did I ever have a Québécois audience, in the sense that my books would reflect a Québécois way of life, mentality or soul, in the way in which, for example, novels by Michel Tremblay or Yves Beauchemin reveal a Québécois mentality? No, I never did have such an audience because I do not see myself as a witness of reality; I see myself as an explorer in language. Most of my novels are located outside Quebec, in New York, the Arizona Desert, Paris, and in my last novel, *Baroque at Dawn*, the narrator and characters keep moving from Buenos Aires, London to Montreal. In fact, the only place that is important to me is Montreal because part of Montreal has been, in a certain way, exotic to me, not exotic because of ethnic groups, but exotic because of my own people speaking another language, speaking with *toé pis moé*, speaking differently. I grew up in the west part of Montreal, which was mainly an English neighbourhood, while the east part was a French neighbourhood. My mother would tell me that the east part, where my own people were living, was a dangerous part of the city, that it was full of bandits, and of people who did not know how to speak or were not well educated and so on. This is what it means to be colonized, to be talking against your own people and to be taking the values of the other. In fact, my mother used to tell me that I really should get an English husband because anglophones were clean, hard workers, and had good salaries. Part of Montreal in a way was an exotic place for me, as it is in the novels of Michel Tremblay. Montreal has always been at the heart of my novels, especially in a novel like *French Kiss*, in which the

characters cross the whole city from East to West. Maybe I am a writer of the elsewhere, fascinated by the unknown, looking for surprise. I think “literature is the fruit of a displacement in belonging, into a form of belonging that invents its own horizon. I am always displacing myself in terms of my *appartenance*.”<sup>5</sup> There is a young American woman filmmaker who has made a CD-ROM<sup>6</sup> based on my novel *Mauve Desert*. In the novel there is a strong lesbian character, illiterate but full of knowledge of life. She has made that character an African American dyke. Of course I was surprised when I saw the character, but that was perfectly legitimate because nowhere in the text was it said that the character was white. It is interesting to notice that at the time of the shooting of the film the director’s companion was an African American woman, so indeed private life matters in the political life and often nourishes cultural statements we make and the social aspect of what we invent.

That being said, I am indeed familiar with the question of identity/ otherness. I know what it means to be discriminated against; I know what it means to speak the language of the other when the other is the dominant, and I know at the same time how much I enjoy learning another language. I also know how it feels to be in a different position. As a woman; I belong to a majority which is treated as a minority. As a writer; I belong to a minority which is attributed authority. As a lesbian; I belong to a minority who will always remain a minority. As a feminist, unfortunately, I also belong to a minority. As a Québécoise, I belong to a minority within Canada; in an independent Quebec I would be part of a majority. As a white woman, I hold a privileged position. I remember one day the Martinican poet Edouard Glissant told me: “You first think of yourself as a woman, but in Africa, you would first be noticed as being white, then as a female.” In other words, I know how it feels to be invisible, pointed at, colonized. I know anger and revolt. I also know the sense of euphoria and celebration that comes along with togetherness and solidarity. I also know how it feels to belong to a dominant group, how easy it is to fall into the “not-me” syndrome, as well as the patterns of justification/ explanation, comprehension/ empathy, or the expedient “fuck you” answer.

But what about the writer in me? Would I not rather be marginal, peripheral, instead of belonging to the dualistic minority/majority? Of course, this is where I like to stand and explore language. I navigate from one marginality to another. I always value life as a reality and a virtuality. I feel a need for



and I enjoy making space in language for my differences. I think that once you are aware of the inferiorization of your gender or of the group you belong to, you need to find the words that will make you even more marginal, but this time in full control of your marginalities. Without a double marginality, there is nothing to tell that will make the *difference*. The difference is interesting when it takes you out of the dualistic trap. Can I say that having experienced many positionalities makes me value multiculturalism? I do not know, but I understand that to be confronted with many roads and with otherness stimulates thinking in modes of comparison and representation. It allows me to detect the mechanism that governs thoughts as they take position amid images, words, knowledges and faces, giving me the impression that we are never done with beauty, which is the repeated intuition we have of the complexity of a species designed as a virtual humanity. Let us say that I am still questioning myself. Multiculturalism produces relations of tension, some creative, some destructive, where we say identity is at stake. Or should we be talking about power, or simply say it is about surviving racism, discrimination and the dualistic bind of invisibility versus overexposure? On a long term basis I do not believe multiculturalism can be successful as a governmental policy. It is not by reinforcing differences that you create a positive environment for cohabitation. Even when there is no difference between people, there is always someone to invent a fictive difference so that it will become useful to increase someone's power. Multiculturalism is a reality. Policies have been made to accommodate different cultures, but I do not think that it will be enough without what we call, and especially what Edouard Glissant calls, *le métissage culturel*, or cultural *métissage*, which means interpenetration, fluidity, new configuration of identity, and continuous movement. We think of ethnicities as culture, but already we live in subcultures; for example, the culture of sports, cyberculture, gay and lesbian culture, Star Trek culture, Jet Set culture, lawyers' culture, militia culture, street culture, religious culture, Barbie's culture, and media culture. All these cultures have codes, languages, styles, a type of self-service culture that seems to be the future. And we have to bear in mind that ethnicity in all these subcultures serves as a means for a lot of people, and represents a "big market."

I will conclude with a last question. Can cultural *métissage* be successful if it means mixing macho, gynophobic, misogynistic and sexist cultures? Can there be a true cultural *métissage* without a signifying presence of women in

every ethnic community? Can there be something new without the insertion of feminine subjectivity and creativity in the current affair of belonging and integrity?

**George Elliott Clarke**

I'm going to begin with a few comments on Canadian multiculturalism. Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau inaugurated the Canadian policy of multiculturalism in his first—and last—parliamentary statement on the subject on October 8th, 1971. The date is interesting because it's the year after the beginning of the *Crise d'octobre*, which involved the traumatic invocation of the War Measures Act. Trudeau inaugurated the policy with these words: "For although there are two official languages, there is no official culture, nor does any ethnic group take precedence over any other. No citizen or group of citizens is other than Canadian, and all should be treated fairly. National unity, if it is to mean anything in a deep and personal sense, must be founded on confidence in one's own individual identity. Out of this can grow respect for . . . others, and a willingness to share ideas, attitudes and assumptions. A vigorous policy of multiculturalism will help create this initial confidence." If Mao Zedong was right to argue that politics is war by other means, it may be tempting to read Trudeau's statement as yet another reaction to the *Crise d'octobre*—to Quebec nationalism—by insisting that no ethnic group should take precedence over any other; and by establishing national unity, not on nationalism *per se* but rather on the liberal promotion of individual identity . . . understood to some extent within its cultural context.

Of course, this policy was, and is, awash in contradictions. Canada may not have official cultures, but for a long time—and this remains true today—writers and artists from so-called "ethnic communities" have often had to rely on Department of Multiculturalism, and now Heritage Canada, grants while watching Anglo-Saxon and French-Canadian derived writers and artists receive the lion's share of Canada Council funding, on the grounds that they are considered to be "real" or "serious" writers and artists, while we coloured folks in Third World/allophone and First Nations groups are merely folklorists, contributors to local colour, residents of "ghettos" of one sort or another. Moreover, Trudeau's statement erased the truth that majority cultures in francophone and anglophone Canada have taken, and still take, precedence over other groups—economically, politically and socially.

Finally, Trudeau's interests in shoring up individual identity by supporting cultural expression reveals an intriguing contradiction, for a pure liberalism ought not to recognize "cultures" at all. Indeed, a policy of multiculturalism necessarily works to "officialize" formerly unofficial cultures.

I think this history is important, for while multiculturalism can and must be critiqued from a multitude of perspectives, it may in the end be a progressive policy. Not because of politicians, not because of the state, but because of what people have done with it. In his essay "The Tapestry Vision of Canadian Multiculturalism," political scientist Seymour Wilson catalogues a whole host of objections to the policy; you've heard some of them already, but I'll give you his list. For example, some have viewed multiculturalism as a cynical election ploy of the Liberals, the governing party at the time; as a policy reinforcing the concept of symbolic ethnicity which provides an appearance of democratic pluralism, but is, in reality, a racist policy of assimilation at best, exclusion at worst; as a set of programs lending legitimacy to the accumulation-function of the State, thus befuddling the more fundamental issues of class in Canadian society; as an English Canadian conspiracy to dilute the Quebec question; and, as one commentator put it, as a masochistic celebration of "Canadian nothingness."

Evidence of all of the above can be found in the federal government's enactment of the policy, but what counts ultimately is what "other" groups, "other" artists and writers, "other" cultures from South Asian- to Italo-Canadian, from African Canadian to Chinese Canadian, have made of it. Indeed, Canadian writing has become polyethnic, as polyethnic as the society itself. And one reason for this has been—despite all attempts to control or dismantle popular groups—the presence of government funds: that's to say, our tax dollars have been partly returned to us to fund the establishment of journals and presses, to publish and circulate books, to give writers time to write, and so on. I'll never forget, for instance, that in 1980, less than a week after the first Quebec Referendum on Sovereignty Association, a group of Black writers and artists from across the country met at McGill University to talk about our aesthetics, our missions, our ideas; to fight and struggle and laugh and party; to construct bridges between . . . our own intra-group ethnicities. The bureaucrats from the Secretary of State for Multiculturalism may have had other goals in mind when they decided to grant the funds that allowed this first Black writers' conference to occur. Perhaps they intended to promote assimilation, to assimilate us; perhaps

they wanted to win our votes for the Liberal Party, to promote federalism to Black francophones; perhaps they intended to achieve all of the above, with a paternalistic smile. But the fact remains that we were able to meet, and it helped some of us to conceive of ourselves, perhaps for the first time, as artists.

Trudeau's 1971 statement was not his government's last word on the subject of multiculturalism. In 1981, as the Canada Act, the nation's amended constitution, was being established, Section 27, a constitutional recognition of multiculturalism, was entrenched. Section 27 demands that the Charter of Rights and Freedoms "shall be interpreted in a manner consistent with the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians." As Seymour Wilson observes once again, charter recognition had a dramatic effect in galvanizing not only the real minorities but also the Aboriginal peoples. As a matter of fact, Section 27 was only entrenched as a result of popular struggle, of popular demand for the recognition of the multicultural nature of the country in legal terms as well. Of course, as has been pointed out, Canada has always been multicultural, although in its history it has performed quite poorly, and quite violently, in its treatment of people from minority communities. For instance, if you look at death penalty records, as I did last summer, you'll discover that whereas in the United States it's mainly African-Americans who have been executed, in Canada, up until the abolition of the death penalty in 1976, it was southern Europeans by and large, Italians, Greeks and also eastern Europeans, who were hanged by the government of Canada. French Canadians were also popular candidates for hanging. For my own group, African Canadians, the tendency was that you'd be executed if you were American or if you came from the United States. If you were Canadian, then it was less likely that you'd be executed; so one can see in the application of the death penalty the operation of racism and exclusivity in the country.

To continue to speak on a personal basis, I am a seventh-generation Canadian of African origin, but also Micmac Native heritage, from Nova Scotia. Also somewhere along the line there is some English—I'm not sure exactly how it happened, but I can't really do anything about it now! But in any event this is the universe in which I've grown up and in which I've come to be a writer. Because Nova Scotia is heavily influenced by its British heritage, I grew up pledging allegiance to the Union Jack at first; the Canadian flag came along shortly after I began my school years. Also at the time I was listening to lots of African-American music, because music was one way for my little community in Nova Scotia—which only consists of thirty thou-

sand people, descended from Loyalists and refugees who came to Canada in 1783 and 1815—to maintain our pride and our connection to our Black roots. Another way was by establishing churches; in fact, they established an Association of Baptist Churches across Nova Scotia in the nineteenth century, some forty years before the National Baptist Convention was established in the United States. This was a reflection, I think, of some sense of roots; and that church experience was extremely important to me as a child, as were the influences that came from a larger society, particularly from the Black community in the United States. I tend to weave all of these various strands of influence into my writing, which reflects the fact that my community has absorbed and is composed of various international influences. I should mention as well that my heritage includes a Caribbean background on my paternal side, and that this has also been an influence on me and on my work.

To conclude, I would say that multiculturalism in Canada may have been promulgated as a means of trying to gloss over issues of race, language and class; but I think that writers and artists in Canada have been able to take advantage of the policy, and to continue to promote it as a means of getting their works out to the public as well as a means of establishing their cultural presences within the country.

### **Paul Yee**

What I want to do with these remarks is to answer two of the questions sent out at the start of this project. By way of caveats, I'd like to say that I am not an academic nor do I teach in a university setting.

The first question was: "How important is a specific cultural affiliation for me as a writer? How would I describe my main cultural affiliation?" Cultural affiliation is very important for me because the subjects I write about as well as my reasons for writing are firmly rooted in the historical experiences of a Canadian cultural group. I am a Chinese Canadian. The key word is Chinese. Chinese in Canada means racial minority, visibly distinct, means even as I speak and write fluent English, as soon as you see me, you know I'm not from England or France. I am a writer because although my cultural group has lived, worked and died in Canada for over a hundred years, it does not have a natural or recognized place in that country's history or literature. This is a situation shared by many other cultural groups in Canada today. I have written both formal (that is, rigidly

footnoted) histories as well as fiction about the Chinese in Canada. I do this writing because as I “give voice” to a people who have lived a unique experience in Canada without leaving books or insights about themselves behind, I also “give voice” to myself. And this strikes at the core of why I write.

When I was growing up, I was painfully shy. I never asked questions in class. At university, I dreaded seminar discussions. Of course, you might argue that silence and shyness are derived from family upbringing, that it’s not a direct result of being Chinese Canadian. But look at my family—it’s Chinese Canadian! Its behaviors were shaped by political, economic, and social forces that deliberately set out to disempower Chinese people. As a result, our patterns of behavior were those of a colonized community.

In my family, my Aunt had direct memories of several thousand white men rampaging through Chinatown, smashing windows, hoping to drive all the Chinese out of Vancouver. The rules of survival that were passed on to me were: “don’t rock the boat,” “don’t go out on a limb,” and “know your place”—and that place was at the margins. In my family, poverty was very real; you worry about putting food on the table and having a roof over your head before you think of going to the movies or pursuing “artistic endeavors.” The concept of the “starving artist” didn’t exist in our colonized community. As a child, I never imagined I could be a writer. Even though the era during which I grew up—the 1960s—was relatively enlightened, my family was trapped in an earlier, darker period of racism and poverty that couldn’t be easily thrown off. Who I am as a writer and a human being is quite intimately inter-twined with my cultural group’s past.

The second question was: “What is your perception of the multiculturalism debates?” To answer this question, I thought about what I had been hearing and reading. There are several broad issues that critics raise in their charges against multiculturalism. Let me quickly run through them before presenting my comments.

One broad issue has to do with education. The critics say there’s an over-emphasis on racism, too much dwelling on the negative side of history. I wonder if there can ever be an “over-emphasis” on racism in a society of increasing diversity where the record has been bleak in this regard. Then, critics say immigrants aren’t learning an official language. That’s hardly true: parents want their children to learn English and most do. For adults, however, it’s hard to learn a new language at an older age. Besides, when they face the choice between going to classes to learn English or going to

work to support their family, they inevitably choose the latter. Otherwise they get labeled as welfare bums. Critics also say immigrants aren't learning enough Canadian history. But what about Canadians in general? Survey after survey has shown the average Canadian knows excruciatingly little about Canadian history. As a matter of fact, history is marginalized throughout North American society today.

A second broad charge is that multiculturalism is weakening the foundations of Western civilization. The evidence: changes in education curricula driven in part by protests against the Eurocentric nature of "the canon," against the "appropriation" of multi-racial voices by white writers, and against the "mis-interpretations" of homeland cultures by mainstream museums. This charge is exaggerated. Personally I believe the Western classics are strong enough to withstand the canon critics. Didn't writer Jane Austen enjoy a banner year at movie theaters recently with renditions of her novels? Isn't "the canon" just being enlarged? And isn't such an expansion inevitable given the increasing diversity in North America?

A third broad issue relates to greater divisions being created in Canadian society. The examples we hear of concern religious groups (Jewish, Muslim, Evangelical) wanting public funding for religious schools, or issues of special treatment for minority groups (turbans for the Mounties, wearing kirpans in schools, religious holidays for workers, wearing hijabs at school). These groups don't feel they're getting equal treatment. It's easy to talk about equality when everybody is the same. But with the increasing diversity in North America, it's not so easy. Who should make the changes? Should newcomers go by the rule, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do"? Does that call for conversion? Hardly, since the Canadian Constitution says that there should be no discrimination on the basis of religion. Immigrants don't come to this country to challenge the rules, they come to follow them. When they see privileges accorded to Christianity while the rules call for no discrimination on the basis of religion, they're asking, "Do you really mean what you say about equal treatment?" Nobody has said that achieving equality would be painless or easy, but we seem to expect it to be.

For me, the most hurtful issue is the charge that multiculturalism retards Canada's social and/or cultural development because groups put their own backgrounds and interests ahead of the public good. As someone who has done a fair amount of volunteer work at the community level, I've always felt that Canada is the sum of all its parts, so if you help people at the grass-

roots improve themselves, if you help them become self-sufficient and confident, then the entire country benefits.

I'd like to finish my comments with a number of observations. In general, multiculturalism is being scapegoated for the growing pains of an increasingly diverse society. Instead of blaming multiculturalism, we should start by realizing that it isn't easy for a growing diversity of peoples to live side by side in peace. It takes patience, compromise, sharing of power, re-thinking of standard assumptions, even love—which reminds me of a great quote: “you can legislate against discrimination, but you can't legislate love”. Secondly, the discussion around multiculturalism has become extremely polarized. If you speak in favor of multiculturalism, it's assumed you buy into and have to defend everything associated with it: anti-racism, affirmative action, exclusive conferences, employment equity, etc. I personally resent this, because each element needs to be judged on its own merits. Thirdly, given the many real barriers that exist in our society, for instance, towards people with disabilities, women in the corporate or political world, gay and lesbian people, people who are unattractive or overweight or short or who don't speak perfect English, I'd say any general measure encouraging respect for diversity is a good start. Finally, it seems to me that in all areas of state social policy, whether it's social assistance, regional development, old age pension, workers compensation, there have always been unintended consequences. Somehow I feel that multiculturalism is being held to a higher standard, that no “down-sides” are allowed. Partly, I think this is because anyone can have an opinion on this issue without doing much homework; it's not like having to figure out how the actuarial tables for the pension system or how the workers' compensation system works. Most importantly, we might ask: do the benefits of multiculturalism outweigh the costs? The politicians think yes and I agree with them.

**Geeta Patel** (response)

*Whither Language? Where Race?—Multiculturalism in the United States*

Multiculturalism in the United States has been haunted by the schisms produced between race and language, or more properly, has been haunted by the way in which debates on racialization have reinforced an English-only model of literary output in the United States. This roundtable, bringing together writers from Canada and the United States, writers who traverse the boundaries between those two countries, can become a productive site



for discussing the ways in which this kind of schism in United States multiculturalism might be breached.

Graham Huggan's opening questions, and specifically the one—Whose multiculturalism?—frame responses offered by the writers we have heard. Under the aegis of discussing multiculturalism, each writer gifts readers and listeners with particular invocations of terms that gained prominence in the nineteenth century, and that were so memorably intertwined by Matthew Arnold: culture/ language/ race/ nation. In the Canadian context, multiculturalism becomes a state policy that seems ventured by a centre to offset demands by Quebec nationalists for a linguistically and culturally differentiated nation state. But the four writers offer resistances to knowledge produced under the aegis of state-funded productions of nationalist cultures. They turn the term multiculturalism on its head, asking for it to be deployed in various ways, and pointing to its deployment in unexpected forms. It is questioned in these pieces as a way of speaking interpolations or interpellations of a subject into racist discourses (either in conformity with or despite home-training); it is deployed as a way of turning something funded by a state into a mandate to explore subversive identifications; as a way of turning to multilingual reading practices that are unexpectedly hybrid; as a way of proposing national identities in coalitions that are always fraught, never realized and always sought.

Some of these same demands are made by organic intellectuals in the United States like Henry Giroux, who turns the term multiculturalism against itself. Giroux radicalizes it in the service of a renewed democratic call in a post-Fordist, global economy as the left is beset by right-wing attacks against radical educational imperatives. I would like for a moment to capture the linguistic pluralism and its links to ethnicity (and race) posed more often by Canadian renditions of multiculturalism and turn it to the service of an analysis and proposal located in the United States that take up on Giroux's call. For this I would like to turn to the critique of monolingualism suggested in Werner Sollors' edited collection *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity and the Languages of American Literature*.

What the essays in Sollors' collection suggest is that American literature has been produced as such (as American literature) in forms that obscure, elide and finally efface its complex linguistic heritages. This despite collections of literature from the United States (notably one compiled during the first world war, *The Cambridge History of American Literature*), which had sixty pages on non-English writing; detailed accounts of aboriginal,

German, French and Yiddish literatures; and which assumed that its readers would be comfortably proficient in at least three languages (Sollors, *Multilingual America* 5-6). The insistent monolingualism of strands of both mono- and multiculturalism seems to have interwoven antecedents all of which provide a different historical genesis of what constitutes American literature, the American nation, and the “proper” American citizen. Barrett Wendell’s 1900 history volunteers language (but not race), a language emerging from the stern Christian proprieties of early Elizabethan Boston Brahmin transcendentalism (beware of Babel), leavened by Shakespeare, whose aesthetics provide a culturally independent American renaissance. Other literatures for him are the “rest of the story.” Charles F. Richardson’s 1886 history, which Wendell draws from, focuses on racialization, notably the racialization of whiteness: Irish, French and Germans merging into Anglo-Saxonism under the latter’s potent influence and the leverage of new conditions. Other literatures are at best an ineffectual hindrance, and at worst, a hindrance to an intellectual sympathy with English ideas. Richardson’s hard-edged survival of the fittest is softened into Wendell’s inevitable seduction of men of taste by the superiority of a necessary aesthetic. In 1946, Robert Spiller advocates the idea of racial mixture as the focus of his history. But his amalgam, and the origins of American literary history, are constituted of melded, transformed European cultures, spoken in a melting pot tongue that supposedly does not blend with racial affiliations.<sup>7</sup>

All of these histories, whether or not they rely on the polemic of racial superiority to produce a perfect Americanism, implicitly fold their arguments into narratives based on a racialized linguistic hegemony. In the process, whiteness, and its literary embodiment as the arbiter of national belonging, become something articulated through “proper” forms of American-English. Ethnicity drops away, and with it, other languages. Race is articulated in English, and ethnicity (spoken in other languages) is disarticulated from race. As languages other than English fall aside, so do histories and literary products scripted in them. One language and a concomitant culture, in the form of cultural artifacts like literature, here arbitrate the proprieties of national belonging. And at the same time it is clear, in these various histories, that the disarticulation of race from ethnicity and language, and the deracination of Anglo-Saxon English, permit certain seamless, seemingly natural affiliations. These are the affiliations between a proper language, a national “culture,” and a certain rendition of whiteness (often scanned through class).

In recent couplings of language, ethnicity and race, language continues to be coiled into ethnicity, and separated from race. And ghostly combinations of race and language and ethnicity still haunt us and are familiar to us, even when they are not seen as such. Race and language are blended in racist epithets, lingering over from the nineteenth century, used on those who speak another language: primitive, degenerate, irrational, marked by illiteracy, intellectually challenged. Race and language are also blended when raced bodies who speak a different English are, by virtue of their raced speaking, excluded from the realm occupied by a civilized citizenry.

The divisions between race and language assume national proportions when each is apportioned to a different country; for instance multicultural politics in the United States works through discourses of race, as against multicultural politics in Canada which is detoured more often through language. Affiliations through language, then, seem to offer a new politics of belonging for the United States, one not tainted by the racist violences inherent in both left- and right-wing polemics around race. But to sever the history of given, and necessary, connections between language and race in the United States is not to account for the ways these connections will reappear unwittingly as the obscene underside of power. And to sever such a history is to confine the production of knowledge about racialization to knowledge scripted in English. To sever such a history will leave United States with a poorer sense of the “multi” in multicultural: of mixing, of mingling, of pushing and pressing in languages that range from Urdu, through Hungarian and Spanish, to Tewa.

What this roundtable offers us are moments in which to linger on the push of *métissage*, on the persuasions of translation, and on the press of struggle and coalition bequested in life story and luxuriously strong politics. This roundtable confers on us a chance to ask again—“Whose multiculturalisms? What do they offer as origin, as history, as politics?” Placing Canada in radical conversation with the United States pries open what seems all too natural to forms of citizenship—alliances among the right language(s), right culture(s) and right race(s). The current languages of multiculturalism in the United States, focusing as they do on pedagogy and proper citizenry, might well learn across such conversations, and across the production of knowledges, in languages other than English, and in incarnations of unfamiliar English.

NOTES

- 1 What follows is a slightly edited transcript of the available symposium proceedings. The writers themselves we consider well-known enough not to need further introduction here. All are widely published and have won national, and/or international, literary prizes.
- 2 Thanks go out also to all those who helped at the symposium or helped make it possible. These include Werner Sollors, also a respondent during the event (whose contribution unfortunately was not taped due to a technical error, and could not be made available here); our team of student helpers at both Sherbrooke and Harvard, without whom the symposium could not have taken place; Harvard University, for its generous support both as a venue and a sponsor; and our other sponsors, the Graduate Programmes in Comparative Canadian Literature and the Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines at the University of Sherbrooke, and the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs/ Ministère des Affaires Étrangères et du Commerce International du Canada. Special thanks to Rajini Srikanth, an inspirational co-organizer, and to Natasha Dagenais, Peggy Devaux, and Martin Cyr Hicks, who laboured long hours to transcribe unruly tapes.
- 3 It is impossible to provide a full survey of relevant materials here; for critical discussions, good starting points are Berry and Laponce, with excellent entries by Padolsky and by Simon/Leahy; a special issue of *Mosaic*, 29:3 (September 1996), entitled "Idols of Otherness: The Rhetoric and Reality of Multiculturalism," which includes review essays that survey important publications in both Canada and the United States; the situation in Canada and Québec has been explored in Winfried Siemerling's edited collection *Writing Ethnicity* and in Christl Verduyn's edited *Literary Pluralities*. In terms of literary texts, over thirty anthologies have been dedicated to specific groups in Canada since the 1970s, while others combine writers from different backgrounds; widely used anthologies include those by George Elliott Clarke, Hutcheon and Richmond, Kamboureli, King, Moses and Goldie; among important reference works are Helly and Vassal and the bibliographies by Miska and under the general editorship of Batts.
- 4 Excerpt from Nicole Brossard, *La Nuit verte du Parc Labyrinthe / Green Night of Labyrinth Park / La Noche verde del Parque Laberinto* (trilingual edition), trans. Lou Nelson and Marina Fe (Laval, Québec: Ed. Trois, 1992).
- 5 Excerpt from Nicole Brossard, *Elle serait la première phrase de mon prochain roman / She Would Be the First Sentence of My Next Novel* (bilingual edition), trans. Suzanne de Lotbinière-Harwood (Toronto: The Mercury Press, 1998).
- 6 See *Mauve Desert*, a CD-ROM translation by Adriene Jenik, based upon the novel *Le Désert mauve* by Nicole Brossard. [ajenik@ucsd.edu](mailto:ajenik@ucsd.edu), 1997.
- 7 My information about these histories has been gleaned from Alide Cagidemetro's extraordinarily informative article "'The Rest of the Story'; or, Multilingual American Literature," which is one of the pieces in Sollors' edited collection.

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