

Writing Dislocation

Transculturalism, Gender, Immigrant Families: A Conversation with Ven Begamudré

Ven Begamudré has published a novella, *Sacrifices* (The Porcupine's Quill, 1986); a short story collection, *A Planet of Eccentrics* (Oolichan, 1990); and a novel, *Van de Graaff Days* (Oolichan, 1993). He co-edited with Judith Krause *Out of Place: Stories and Poems* (Coteau, 1991) and edited *Lodestone: Stories by Regina Writers* (Fifth House, 1993). Daniel Coleman spoke with Ven Begamudré in Regina on May 13, 1994.

You've become known in Canada for coining the term "transculturalism" which you've contrasted with multiculturalism. Do you want to elaborate on the differences between them?

I'm more interested in transculturalism because I think the future of Canadian society certainly doesn't lie in segregating people into ghettos, the worst thing about multiculturalism, but it lies in transculturalism, which is a cross-over between these cultures. Now multiculturalism as it operates in society itself is different from the government policy. And we tend to forget that there are other things affecting it—class affects it, and economic power affects it. I've been turned down for apartments by white people, but I've also been turned down for apartments by Ukrainians who are now considered white but two generations back were not considered white. The worst landlords I ever had were a Black and a Jew.

Maybe multiculturalism as an official policy hasn't worked because people at the individual level have not become more tolerant. When you spit on a person or deny them an apartment because they are different from you, you have done society at large a fundamental injustice. No amount of government policy is going to correct that; these people have to change as people. Transculturalism assumes that there is a process of change and of evolution which is necessary among these different cultures, and that eventually we stop being Indo-Canadian or Ukrainian-Canadian; we simply

become human. And I'm much more comfortable with that idea than the idea that you're allowed to hang on to your own culture, because what worries me about multiculturalism is that it fosters divisions among cultures. People try to hang onto their heritage not because it helps them survive but because it's another dusty artifact in a museum that they trot out in order to justify what they do.

How does writing about immigrants from India to Canada, or people who travel back and forth, play a part in the evolutionary transculturalism that you are talking about?

The first idea for the collection *Out of Place* came in 1983. It was meant to be a book of stories, poems, and photographs by immigrants to the prairies. We wanted to juxtapose the obvious image of the Ukrainian babbas with a modern poem or story about Ukrainian-Canadians. By the time Judith and I started working on it, however, it had stopped being a multicultural anthology dealing with non-Anglo experiences, because I realized I didn't want it to be the kind of book that dealt with cultures that were ghettoized. And that's why you'll find a number of Anglo writers in *Out of Place*. I wanted to see how being where they were from affected their writing. I didn't want to buy into the anti-white-Anglo backlash that's going on among some immigrant communities. I wanted to see what it is these people had in common, and that's why you'll find a piece written in West Indian dialect in the same anthology as a piece written by, say, Anne Szumigalski whose background is Welsh but who has lived in Canada for a long time. There are some non-white writers who are in *Out of Place* and their work is not obviously from a particular culture. And this for me was an anthology to reflect the new Canada, a transcultural Canada as opposed to a multicultural Canada.

Oddly enough, the anthology was only supposed to deal with cultural dislocation. But then we started getting other forms of dislocation. Caroline Adderson sent a story which had nothing at all to do with culture, but it raised the anthology to a new level because it was a story about a single mother who was trying to raise a boy in a small town and he comes under the influence of a disturbed neighbour girl. So it raised the level of the anthology to psychological and other forms of dislocation. Cultural dislocation includes psychological dislocation, which is why it's such a powerful theme to deal with.

Do you think that might be why stories about cultural dislocation have quite a wide appeal in Canada, since they might give expression to a sense of psychological dislocation that Canadians feel in other contexts?

I think so. I think one of the things that has really affected this century has been the movement of people. In, let's take nineteenth-century Britain, the kind of psychological dislocation that was going on dealt more with class than with culture. Say, Dickens was writing about the plight of people in poor houses, or boys who were cleaning out boot-blackening bottles. But that work had an impact, even though he was writing about class dislocation or about people wanting to move between classes, because there was still this underlying element of psychological dislocation: What happens to people when they are either forced to remain where they are physically or economically? And what happens to people when they have the opportunity to move either physically or economically? It could be in the twenty-first century that we will not be so fascinated with cultural dislocation, but by something else. Maybe the sheer impact of information and the way information is used will cause psychological tensions in our society and that's what writers will deal with. Dislocation is not the only thing to write about. But it's certainly something that has affected a lot of writers now late in the twentieth century. You can have dislocation of ideas. Maybe all we're doing in writing is articulating conflicts of one kind or another.

Many of your stories deal with tensions between genders as well as between cultures. I'm thinking here of Krishna and Rukmini and their strained marriage in Van de Graaff Days, or of a number of stories in A Planet of Eccentrics including "The Evil Eye," "A Promise We Shall Wake in the Pink City After Harvest," and "Samsara." In Krishna's case, to focus on one example, the processes of education, immigration, and delayed fatherhood influence the way he acts out his own masculinity. Given your upbringing, it seems inevitable that cultural tensions would be prominent in your work, but what makes gender—and this particular overlay of gender and culture—so productive for you?

The cultural upbringing—that's obvious. What isn't so obvious is that I was, like a lot of people in my generation and in previous generations, surrounded by women during my childhood. This also happened to young boys in Britain, in the Empire, because their fathers were usually away and

they were surrounded by their mothers and sisters and governesses, and then, around the age of six or seven thrown into boy's schools where they had to deal with men after very little experience of dealing with men. And this is what happened to me.

All the important people in my life until I was six-and-a-half years old were women. My grandfather was there but he was peripheral; my uncle was there and he was peripheral. I lived in a house of women: my mother and our servants. When we visited my cousins' houses, my aunts would be home, my uncles would be working, or out somewhere. So it never occurred to me until I came to Canada that the world was run by men; I naturally assumed that the world was run by women. And it seemed a safe world to live in. Now in *Van de Graaff Days*, this is what happens to Hari. First of all he's thrown into a strange society when he comes to Canada, but because he's enrolled in that boy's school, he's also thrown into a masculine world which he doesn't know how to deal with.

Have you ever thought consciously of writing about gender itself? Has it crossed your mind to address the absence of men in your youth?

It would never occur to me to write simply about men, because the world for me is made up of men and women. In some of my more recent stories I've been writing much more about men, but this is because I've been coming to terms with my relationship with men, especially with older men, which was not a very happy relationship as I was growing up. I have done some things that were exclusively male, like being in a private school for a while, like being in army cadets and the army reserve, but it's not a life which appeals to me.

Ironically now, I've had to come to terms with my dislike of men, which is why I've been writing about them more. I'm reading a lot of poetry by men. There are three male poets especially who have been influencing my work in recent times: one is Don Coles in Toronto, one is Jay Meek in North Dakota, and the other has been Patrick Lane. It's been an attempt for me to come to terms with my father, I suppose. But more than that, it's an attempt on my part to ask myself what kind of a man I am going to be in middle age and in old age.

Family conflicts and negotiations are a recurring theme in your writing from Sacrifices and A Planet of Eccentrics to Van de Graaff Days and your

forthcoming memoir, Extended Families. What is it that makes the family such a productive subject of attention for you?

The first thing is that there's a lot of material. I never expected to be writing about my family so much, because I spent so much of my youth staying away from them. When I first started writing, I wrote completely fictional work, and it wasn't very authentic. I was writing about things I didn't really know about. Sitting around the dinner table at Fort San, the writing school, I would tell stories about my family—about visiting the family god and so on—and people would say, "You should write that down," and I used to think, Who's going to care? But the revelation came for me when one of the chapters from *Sacrifices* and then later *Van de Graaff Days*—the chapter in which Krishna goes back to visit Hari and Hari forgets about him—that was my first published piece as a short story. Then I realized that there were probably more universal connections than I had realized. Of course, I had always known that the more specifically you write the more universal your work is, but I had never thought of my own family as being of particular interest to anyone. [laughs]

I suppose writing about my family was a way of trying to come to terms with them and with what had happened to us. There's a danger because, while I do extract material from my family, people assume that all of my fiction is somehow based on real characters or real incidents, and that's not true. I think the trick is to blur the line enough so that the fictional stuff seems real. Sometimes you can't write about real characters in your family because they tend to be too stereotypical. Krishna, for instance, is a combination of at least two of the men in the previous generation. And Rukmini is a combination of two of the women on her side of the family. Now that I've come to terms with my family, it's just material to me.

That makes me wonder about what happens when you add the experience of immigration to the family relationships; it brings in things like disjunction and distance between family members.

I don't write so much about immigration as I do about families. Immigration complicates family relationships, but the relationships would probably have been not that different if the characters had remained where they were, in the same place. It's just that they tend to be strained and per-

haps exaggerated when people immigrate. Also, family is a good metaphor for society at large, because you can find fragments of society within any one family. I was telling you the story of the North Indian fellow who is getting his Ph.D. in English literature. His father ran a shop and a gas station, and the other three brothers basically followed in the father's footsteps. From there you can extrapolate to things that are happening in the wider society.

So if immigration exaggerates or intensifies situations common in a broader society, how does it work in the example you've just given? The three sons follow in the father's footsteps, but the one son takes a Ph.D. at the University of Toronto.

It tends to speed up the natural process in families in which there's inter-generational conflict. Somebody told me once that there are three main themes in immigrant literature: one is intergenerational conflict, the other one is cultural dislocation, obviously, and I don't remember what the third one is. But when people bring their children over to another country, they risk losing them because their children change. There's the natural process of rebellion that any generation goes through, but if this new generation is also being influenced by the new society which is trying to assimilate them, then the conflicts within the family become heightened.

I've noticed a certain pattern whereby the generation that comes to a new place is trying to hang on to its traditions and the next generation is turning its back on those traditions, but the generation after them starts looking back towards those traditions again. Or, you could flip that around: there are some first generation people who come to a new country and try to assimilate as quickly as possible and don't hold with their old traditions. And then their children do the reverse. They want to learn Czech, for instance. And they may say to their mother, "Talk to me in Czech." And the mother will say, "We're Canadians now and I don't want to speak in Czech anymore." So there's always this business in which any two generations right next to each other have this need to be opposites to each other.

I think in Van de Graaff Days a lot of that shows up in the conflict between Krishna and Hari, and the different paths that they foresee themselves taking, and especially that Krishna foresees his son taking. And that makes me think of the comment you've quoted from Patrick Lane which is that all sons want to

kill their fathers, which sounds like the Oedipal story. But you refer to a different story in Van de Graaff Days, where you use the Ganesha legend from the Mahabharata and other ancient Indian epics. In some ways, they seem to be describing the same conflict, but I wonder if you would say they are telling the same general story, or do you think the Greek and Hindu mythologies address these conflicts in quite different ways?

Patrick was dealing more with the Oedipal myth, and in that piece that you mentioned, called “Appa, My Father,” I was dealing with it too, to a certain extent. I think Patrick was saying that sons have to kill fathers so that sons are free to go their own way. In *Van de Graaff Days*, the Ganesha story is important because it foreshadows what happens. In the Ganesha story, the father accidentally decapitates his son without realizing it’s his son and then tries to save the boy, but they put an elephant head on the boy and the boy changes in a way that probably the father would never have expected or wanted. And that’s what Krishna does to Hari. By bringing him to North America, he makes Hari into two things: Indian and North American. By making that choice, Krishna is immediately in danger of losing his son, but it’s the price that he’s going to have to pay so that the boy can have a better life. All Krishna knows is he wants to come to North America so Hari will have a better life. But he can’t anticipate what’s going to happen between them: by doing this—by going away to study in the States and spending so much time away from Hari—Krishna is going to lose the connection with Hari. In retrospect, many years later Krishna might regret this. But he’s in his late twenties at the beginning of the novel, and he doesn’t have enough experience to realize what’s going to happen.

So Hari becomes like Ganesha in the sense that he’s half of one and half of another. But in Hari’s case it’s not just that he’s half Indian and half Canadian; the main difference between him and the previous generation of his family is that he’s more interested in music and the arts, while they’re more interested in the sciences.

One thing that seems different about the Ganesha story compared to the Oedipal one is that the Ganesha story pays attention to the father’s anxieties: Shiva decapitates his son, he’s frustrated about access to his wife, and so on. Whereas in the Oedipal story Laius is more in the background: he’s killed early on and then the rest of the story—Freud’s version anyway—concentrates on Oedipus.

Yes, we tend to forget the earlier part in which the father actually had the child cast out in order to prevent the child from killing the father. I suppose in that instance there's a parallel because the father does something which backfires, and in *Van de Graaff Days* the father also does something which backfires and he has to spend many, many years dealing with the problem, which is that he's irreconcilably separated from his son as a result of the decision he made.

What role does Hari's being more artistically inclined play in his feeling less need to identify as strongly masculine, say, as compared to Krishna? Do you think there's anything about the role of the artist that either changes or crosses over gender definitions?

Sometimes it does. Some of my male colleagues find it a bit threatening when I've suggested that in order for writers to write faithfully about society, they have to have a feminine sensibility. And some of my friends have objected to this because they don't want to have to do that. They write quite well about men and that's all very well. But it's not just a question of masculine and feminine. Some writers, for instance, need to keep complete control over their work. I don't have complete control over my work. I'm quite willing to have other forces come into it. So when I have suggested this, the writers who like to have complete control would rather not have to deal with the question about whether there are other powers at work when you are writing. [laughs]

I suppose, to go back to the original question, I would never write simply about men or simply about women. I think you write about what is important to you at a particular time. And as I've been writing *Van de Graaff Days* and *A Planet of Eccentrics* this question about male-female was very important to me. Now in my new work this question of . . . it's not a matter of rediscovering masculinity, but more a question of coming to terms with the masculine side of society.

So that might be represented in the family context by father and son relationships. But how do you work with it in larger social contexts in your new work?

In some of the new work I'm exploring the backlash that's occurring now against men. And I'm exploring it because I have always secretly felt that

men deserve the backlash that they're getting now—except that whenever any of these things happens, they tend to go to extremes. So one of the pieces I'm working on is about a fundamentally decent man, who is part of the problems society faces right now. But he never meant to stand in the way of any woman; he was just raised the way he was. So I want to see how a man who's basically decent is going to come to terms with the fact that the world that he wanted so badly to create is not the world that his grandchildren are inheriting. And the conflict becomes immediate, because he goes to Europe and his daughter-in-law accompanies him. She has just separated from his son, and she partly blames this old man for the breakdown of her marriage. So he's going to have to face the question of whether he had made sins of commission or omission while he was practicing his career, and was it really his fault that the son's marriage broke down?

The minute certain trends start occurring in society and become exaggerated, then I start questioning them. A very obvious example is that right now there is quite a serious backlash against what we call DWEeMS—"Dead White European Men." And when I started buying into it, I thought, But wait a minute, I'd better start reading some of these dead white European men and see if they really are as—not "bad" in the sense of bad writing—but whether they really have something to feel guilty about. So I read books like Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* and a bit of Thomas Mann. And the stuff is wonderful! It's just too bad that society has used these people's work in order to perpetrate certain dominant political modes of thinking.

*Jack Hodgins suggested when you were starting out as a writer that you might do for Indian culture what Isaac Bashevis Singer has done for Yiddish culture in North America. At the time, you protested you didn't know enough about India, but your publications since then show you've become more confident about your Indian heritage. Still, one reviewer of *A Planet of Eccentrics* questioned the authenticity of your representations of India. How do you feel about this matter now?*

Well, she was right within fairly narrow parameters. It's the same criticism, for instance, that I have leveled against people who have written about India and made some obvious mistakes or perpetrated certain ideas which I think are insidious.

The question of authenticity applies to any writer. I have a certain obligation to be authentic about whoever I'm writing about. And if I make mistakes then it's up to reviewers to point that out and to give positive criticism which I can then apply. This particular review didn't give me anything that I could usefully apply. [laughs] Writers have an obligation to be authentic. At the same time, there's this thing called poetic license and there's a question of how far you can apply it. You start wandering into questions of ethics here. I would never say a fiction writer has less of an obligation to be authentic than a nonfiction writer. But you do the best you can, and sometimes you make quite obvious mistakes.

This is a related question: At one point you claimed that although you didn't grow up in India, you've inherited a Hindu belief in genetic imprinting; you've also said that the old Indian stories work for you. How do they "work"? What is the work that they do?

They give me a grounding; they give me a sense of connection. I grew up learning the Judeo-Christian stories and the Greek and Roman myths because when I was in school we were still heavily influenced by the British educational systems, and the British, if they did know about the Indian myths, tended to be confined to the Asiaologists or whatever they called themselves. So learning about the Indian myths and using them is my way of keeping a connection with my past. Part of my development as a person during the last fifteen years has been a recognition that I can't live in one world or the other; I have to live in both. Because I don't know enough about India, I spend a fair amount of time trying to learn about it.

On a personal level, we need things to fall back upon. And I'm much more comfortable with some of the Indian concepts, things like reincarnation, than with some of the Western concepts—that you have one life and at the end of it you either go to heaven or hell or purgatory. That's a very limited choice to give people. What I like about Hinduism is that it's like a smorgasbord: there are all these different gods, and you pick the stories that are important to you at a particular time in your life or during a particular event. I like it that before you build a house you would think about Ganesha. Or if you are writing poetry or music you would think about Saraswati.

One of the things I like about Hinduism is that it's much more accepting of different people—not with the revival of fundamentalist Hinduism,

certainly—but I feel more free to manoeuvre within Hinduism than within Christianity. I've found that the more I've been exposed to Christianity, the more I've been appalled by the obvious intolerance. The more I've seen of Hinduism, the more I have been appalled by the intolerance that it has engendered—especially in its treatment of women, outcastes and non-caste people. But I think the trick is to find the best in any of these cultures, religions, or mythologies, and try to create something new that is essentially good.

That makes me think of your article, “Greetings from Bangalore, Saskatchewan,” where you indicate that your identity as a writer combines so many things: you talk about South India and a Canadian prairie city, your ancestry that mixes Aryan and Dravidian sources. How do mixed heritage and double location inform your choices from multiple traditions?

I was trying to deal in that article with my fear that a certain amount of genetic purity was creeping into the appropriation debate which was starting at the time: the whole question of who is entitled to speak for which culture. And even in the twentieth century with all the mass migrations that are going on, people are becoming less pure than they were. And so I looked back in my own background. If you break South India into subcultures, my mother is from one, my father is from another. So even when I was born, it was a bit unusual that I should be born to parents of Andhra and Kanarese ancestry. Now it's much more common. Now even North Indians and South Indians form essentially mixed marriages, though we in the West may not think of them as such. So that's why I went back even farther to the question of the Dravidians and the Aryans intermarrying. It was a reaction to this underground current of purity that I detect right now.

I was just in Toronto last weekend at the Desh Pardesh festival, and I met Indians who are about ten years younger than me whose father is Irish, the mother is Indian, but the child is born in the Caribbean. Well, what does this make the person? What it makes the person, I think, is that this is the new human being. Within a couple of generations, people will be so mixed it won't matter what they really are. When I look at the new generation of South Asian writers in Canada, they are much more mixed than any of us are. I know of one video artist who's father is German and the mother is Indian, and when you look at this person you don't know what they are,

and at a certain point it doesn't matter what they are. It's good to be moving toward this stage.

Somebody said about my earlier work that what I was doing was syncretism—which has to do with taking one set of ideas and another set of ideas and combining them together to come up with a third set. This man was a Lutheran minister in Sweden. The question of hybridity came up at the Dosh Pardesh conference, because you have this generation of artists who are hybrids of white and South Asian background, and they resent being treated like hybrids because they feel that the hybrid is an unnatural combination.

You've mentioned words like "syncretism" and "hybridity" and even "dislocation," but how would you locate your writing in a literary tradition, in relation to, say, Canadian or Indian or Immigrant or Postcolonial literature?

There was an anthology called *The Geography of Voice* which was edited by Diane McGifford and she talked about each of the writers. When she got to me, she said with my writing South Asian writing in Canada had come full circle, because I was rediscovering India—so I was part of a new generation—whereas the other writers that she deals with before me know India, and are more Indian than Canadian. So her point, I think, was that if I was bringing the writing full circle in Canada, then what I was doing was setting the stage for the next generation of writers who are probably going to write more about Canada than about India. Or, in a strange sort of way, may end up writing a lot more about India and being more culturally specific.

I'm quite surprised when I go to readings by younger South Asian writers because their work is so specific to their culture. There are great in-jokes there. Most of which I get, but some of which I don't get. Part of the reason also is that the reading audience for this work is growing. Indians in Canada are wanting to read about themselves and so they laugh when you refer to their grandmother and stuff like that. I've tried to write so that Westerners can get a grasp of what I'm writing about, but the Indians will see the in-jokes. And if the Westerners don't see the in-jokes, it doesn't matter. This is where, of course, I run into my own limitations because I don't know as much about India as some other writers.

It could be that I am bringing the writing full circle and that other people will take it in another direction. I'm the inbetween generation: most of the

Indians in this country are either quite a bit older than I am or quite a bit younger. They may only be ten or fifteen years younger, but the point is that they were born in Western society and grew up with English in society whereas I didn't. When my family came here, we were among the first hundred families who were allowed into Canada once Indians were allowed to immigrate to Canada again—this is late fifties, early sixties. And many of those families didn't bring children with them. They had their children here. So some people treat me as a second-generation writer, and others treat me as a first-generation writer.

Many of these issues are related to your own family's immigrant and colonial history, then?

What I've heard is that Postcolonial or Commonwealth writers are quite fascinated with change, and this deals with that concept of transculturalism. It seems to me that in order to survive, in order to make any headway, you have to change. And that's why I'm more interested in transculturalism than multiculturalism: one of the failings of multiculturalism is that it told people, "You don't have to change. You can be the way you were over there, and you'll be quite happy." Now people have started to realize that there are certain pitfalls in staying the way you were over there when you are over here. I didn't realize that the concept of the necessity for change is an underlying theme in some Postcolonial writing. But certainly we have changed. People who have come from the British colonies are very Anglo, but also very Indian or Mauritian or whatever they were originally. You can either resist that change or you can keep going with it. In a sense that may be betraying your original culture, but the problem is that there's no point staying Indian in Canada if you're not living in India. But there's no point in assimilating and becoming completely Canadian, because you'll never become completely Canadian. And maybe that's where these Postcolonial writers are positioned right now.

Your books have appeared along with publications by Canadians from what used to be the British Empire—I'm thinking of Bharati Mukherjee, Rohinton Mistry, M.G. Vassanji, Rachna Mara, Neil Bissoondath, among others—and I wonder what you make of the Canadian production and consumption of fiction by immigrants from "exotic" places. Why do you think Canadians are

interested? Where does that interest come from? Is there anything discomfoting about people's interest in the exotic?

There's a tendency for the general Canadian reading public to read this work because it is exotic. This has put a lot of pressure on the writers, and some of them resent it. But the point is: you've got to get in wherever you can. And if people are going to read your work because they think it's exotic, fine, but it's up to you then to subvert their notions of exoticism. They may read your work because they like reading *National Geographic*, and they've always been fascinated with India—so they read it and as they're reading you start showing that these Indians are not exotic after all. It's not just a matter of their being ordinary, they might be downright banal. A white Canadian may be more interesting than this person from Sri Lanka or the Caribbean. And that's the way you change people's concepts. I'm a great believer in using stereotypes and dominant ideas in order to subvert those stereotypes and dominant ideas.

My favorite metaphor comes from photography. And this is relevant to the writing I do and to Postcolonial literature and the next generation of these writers. When the British introduced photography to India, the Indians would do a couple of things: First of all, there was no vanishing point or use of perspective in these photographs. And secondly, they would manipulate the photographs after they were printed by hand-colouring them—not just with water colour, which gives you a much more subtle effect, but with oil paint, which creates a three-dimensional effect. And as if that wasn't enough, they started pasting bits of coloured string and jewels onto these photographs. The Europeans, the British, looked at these things and said, "You people don't know what you're doing! You're taking a modern technological tool and you're using it in a primitive fashion." What they didn't realize is that, just as the British photographers had been trained to emulate Constables and Turners, so also the Indians were trying to emulate Indian painting. Indian painting is flat, there's no vanishing point generally, and Indian painting is manipulated by pasting things on sometimes. But this was primitive to the British because, of course, this is what they had done centuries before. It was fine for the monks in the Middle Ages to paint on manuscript pages with goldleaf, but not for a nineteenth-century Englishman. They had the printing press after all.

Now two things happened: These Indian photographs that were made at

the turn of the century—you can't buy them because they are worth so much. They're held by museums and galleries and private collectors. But the second thing is—going back to the late nineteenth century—the Indian photographers decided they didn't like being looked down upon by the British. And they needed to make a living as studio photographers, so they learned how to make European photographs with vanishing points and didn't manipulate the photographs after the fact. So for their European clients, they made European photographs; for their Indian clients, they made Indian photographs. Raja Rao in *Kanthapura* says "How do we describe the culture which is our own in a language which is not our own?" And then proceeds to do it. And so by sneaking in these elements from your own culture, you start subverting the dominant aesthetic theories.

Your photography analogy also suggests that certain cultural traditions produce certain genres and so when you're forced by your circumstances to think transculturally, it might also involve thinking and working across genres, across disciplines. I wonder, in the new memoir Extended Families or in the new material you're working on, what connections you might see between genre-crossing and the transcultural thinking you've been doing.

Well, the new memoir is probably a good example because George Woodcock read a draft and said it was extremely Indian in its architecture. He said it was rather like a piece of Indian music played on a *veena*, because there's a certain droning aspect to it and then some melody comes in and when Western listeners are subjected to this kind of music they become impatient because it doesn't seem to be moving forward. The memoir is probably my most Indian work because it doesn't have any obvious throughlines. And I will have to make revisions and certain accommodations in order to keep the Western reader reading—as well as subverting their expectations of what's happening.

The memoir is structured by journals from my first trip back to India, memoirs about people in my family written through hearsay—sometimes questioning the, not the truth, but the accuracy of what they're saying—and it also includes fragments of fiction based on these memoirs of other people. Because I wanted to play with how, first of all, these stories get handed down: they're *real* stories, but they get changed by being handed down. And when you sit down to write something fictional, you're chang-

ing it even more. And there are also family photographs. What I'm doing is writing about an Indian extended family, and I felt that I couldn't do it in the normal Western way. I couldn't write a non-fiction version of *War and Peace* or *Gone With the Wind*, because the family was extended and fragmented, and so it seemed that the book itself should be extended and fragmented. But how do you keep your reader going through all of that? So even though I said I'm writing these books about India to discover things about myself and my connections with India, maybe this will be the last Indian book, because maybe I'll have discovered what I need to know.

As to whether the cross-genre is related to the transcultural, I'm not sure. It may go beyond cross-genre, because from what I've been seeing of the Indian artists practicing in Canada, they feel obliged to do cross-disciplinary or interdisciplinary work: performance pieces, dance with photographs projected onto screens, text, visual art, or they do a ritual— they might write a poem and then burn the poem in a religious ceremony. It's probably no coincidence. It may simply be that it is becoming increasingly difficult to deal with cultural and other ideas within one discipline alone or one genre alone. My ideal way of getting across this story of my family is to do an interdisciplinary photography work. I'm not ready to do that yet, so I'm still working in print, but the very fact that I'm adding photographs is changing the nature of the book. So maybe this is related to the fashion these days for deconstruction and metafiction—that life is getting so complicated that the old artforms are not serving us in isolation, that they have to be mixed.

