The Art of the Possible:

Literature, Citizenship and Canadian Multiculturalism in a Global Context

Carrie Dawson and Marjorie Stone
Dalhousie University

Remember Charlie Smoke? Charlie Smoke's name was in the news for a few weeks in 2002 when Canadian immigration officials made an unsuccessful attempt to deport him to the U.S. after discovering that he was working as a teacher's assistant in Regina but did not have proof of Canadian citizenship. Charlie Smoke belongs to the Lakota First Nation in Alberta. He was, he says, born at Akwesasne, a Mohawk territory on the border between Ontario and New York, though he was never issued a birth certificate and never registered as a status Indian. At any rate, he considers himself to be neither a Canadian nor a U.S. citizen. Instead, Charlie calls himself a pre-Canadian aboriginal person and claims he has the right to live on either side of the border.

Eight years before Charlie Smoke's citizenship claims were held up for public scrutiny, Thomas King wrote "Borders," a short story about a Blackfoot family from Alberta who are retained at the American border because the woman driving the car refuses to identify as either Canadian or American, but chooses to identify as Blackfoot. So they camp out in the "no man's land" of the parking lot behind the duty-free store and her son entertains television reporters who ask him "how it felt to be an Indian without a country," while his mother attempts to negotiate their passage.

King's prescience is remarkable. But his story resonates for many other reasons, including the humor that is valued as a mode of survival and resistance in so many works of Native Canadian literature, and that is integral to King's readings and media performances. The desperately earnest and bewildered border guard who makes a show of being culturally sensitive while maintaining that "you have to be American or Canadian" deserves a laugh. But it is what Margaret Atwood calls "subversive laughter," a laughter that turns on the unfunny need to move beyond models that construe our countries as homogenous national communities. King's story recalls Marshall McLuhan's argument that Canada is "a borderline" case, a nation defined by its interfaces, its alterity, not its essence. But those of us who encounter King's "Borders" after Charlie Smoke's name is no longer newsworthy – after it has been eclipsed by declarations of war and so many stories about terrorism – are also reminded of the alienation and "unhomeliness" endured by those Canadians for whom border crossing has become increasingly difficult.

If King's story speaks to a kind of citizenship that is not conferred or confirmed by borders and birth certificates, Catherine Bush's novel *The Rules of Engagement* examines the privilege of Canadians who take their national identity and their passports for granted. "Traveling as a Canadian is perhaps the easiest way to find safe passage," Bush writes. "In a crisis everyone wants to be one of us. We're known globally for our innocuousness, our apparent harmlessness. No wonder our passports are the most forged in the world." In spite of and because of the privileges that Canadian passports confer, diffcult questions nonetheless arise: "Are we to intervene or not? Who are we to let slip within our borders? Who's a stranger? Whom do we allow ourselves to love?" Ultimately, Bush's novel is about the personal finding expression in the political, whereas King's story is about the trauma of having the political imposed on the personal, but both are about the deep cultural meaning that inheres in the ways that one imagines belonging or not belonging to a nation.

Fiction such as "Borders" and *The Rules of Engagement* does more than help us appreciate issues under debate in the contemporary context. As Frank Davey points out, an attentive reading of a literary text not only helps us understand the "unspoken assumptions, wishes, or fantasies" that "underlie that conscious debate." It also allows us to "influence the terms in which it is conducted." Equally important, it helps us to imagine alternatives. As the poet William Blake said, "What is now proved was once only imagined."

Oscar Wilde's paradoxical witticism that "life imitates art" similarly speaks to the role that creative writers play in shaping the ethics of everyday practice and the vision of what might be possible. The metamorphosis of the Canadian literary canon and the expanding readership for an increasingly multi-racial, multi-ethnic Canadian literature both at home and

abroad in the last three decades does much more than simply mirror the development of cultural diversity as a Canadian value. It has also been a primary cause of that social transformation. One has only to consider, for example, works like Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, which, in Austin Cooke's words, helped to turn "around an entire country's understanding of itself and its history." In fact, portions of it were read aloud in the House of Commons during the movement to redress the injustice done to Japanese Canadians.

Like Kogawa, many other creative writers have turned to fiction to rewrite lost and erased histories, as in Wayson Choy's *The Jade Peony* and Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café*, with their moving portrayals of the repatriation to China of the bones of the Chinese-Canadian laborers who helped to build Canada's railways for shipment and were then abandoned. Others turn to seering social critique, as in Dionne Brand's novel *In Another Place, Not Here*, with its haunting representation of the legal, psychological and systemically racist limbo inhabited by Carribean migrant workers in Toronto. Where Catherine Bush's protagonist muses on the myths of Canadian multiculturalism from a position of privilege, the disenfranchised and disillusioned temporary residents and "illegal aliens" who populate Brand's novel too often find that social justice and fundamental rights can only be found "in another place, not here."

Many Canadian creative writers challenge and transform social values by working simultaneously in differing literary forms. Consider, for example, the prolific George Elliott Clarke, who sings the stories of Atlantic African Canadias ("Africadians") in lyrical poetry, rewrites black history in Canada in operatic librettos (*Beatrice Chancey*), and contests, in scholarly essays, a "model blackness" based on African American templates or a myth of Canadian black homogeneity. Typically too, the works of the new generation of Canadian writers syncretically interweave diverse cultural traditions and practices. Thus Tomson Highway blends Cree and Ojibway myths with ballet and European traditions of classical music and epic in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, his eloquent testament to the cultural devastation and dislocations wrought by the residential school system. In *Chorus of Mushrooms*, Hiromi Goto similarly intertwines Japanese cultural traditions and the myths of the Canadian West, showing how some values shift across generations while others remain the same.

Given its capacity to embed social values within myths, traditions, languages, and communities, literature gives a human face to more quantitative or ostensibly objective studies of populations, issues and social trends. As Winfried Siemerling observes, too often cultural diversity "is seen not as an abundance of articulate social practices," engaged in by individual human subjects, "but as a group of silent objects to be studied quantitatively." Working within particular communities, or using imaginative empathy to counteract "negative othering," writers explore experiential dimensions of social and political structures and beliefs from the inside out, so to speak, both within communities and individuals.

Bharati Mukherjee's short story about the Air India tragedy, "The Management of Grief," is a case in point, raising questions about the extent to which "human values" are, in Neil Bissondath's words, "exclusive to no race." In a few brief pages Mukherjee explores both the occasions when grief is shared across cultures (the simple human gestures of the Irish villagers offering sympathy to the relatives of those killed), and the contexts in which collisions between cultures occur: as in the failure of the government social worker to understand or effectively communicate with those she is sent to help. As Deborah Bowen suggests, "grief is transcultural; the management of grief is not." The social worker's textbook models of "multicultural" grief management incorporate Western Christian assumptions about death, the afterlife and rituals of grieving that aggravate suffering instead of relieving it. Indirectly, too, Mukherjee conveys her critical view of the subtle denial of full citizenship rights and justice to those who died on Air India flight 182 and their families – in part because the conflict that led to the terrorist act was not conceptualized primarily as a Canadian conflict and a Canadian government responsibility. Instead, it was viewed as an Indian conflict and an Indian tragedy.

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Tragedy and grief are catalysts for new forms of community in "The Management of Grief," including transnational forms of community. But we also learn from literature that community itself is valued in subtly different ways by different cultures. For example, the ethos of competitive individualism associated with many European-Canadian traditions and underlying concepts of civil rights and copyright is at odds with the valuing of the social group or collectivity or kinship systems in many other cultural traditions. "I've been brought up to believe in kinship, or those with whom we share," as one of the characters says in Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café*. The valuing of the community over the individual in both African Canadian and Anishanabee traditions is similarly brought home in Richard Wagamese's novel *Keeper'n Me*, when the protagonist Garnet Raven, dispossessed of his Native heritage, is taken in by a black family in Toronto and becomes a "James Brown Indian" for a time.

As Marlene Nourbese Philip points out, questions of community raise complex issues of audience and conflicting values for immigrant and minority writers in Canada. If writers shape community values, they are also shaped by them in both nurturing and imprisoning ways. "The choice facing a writer from Eastern Europe or Italy or Latin America is a stark one," Nourbese Philip comments; "work in your mother tongue and – at least in Canada – be restricted to an audience sharing a similar linguistic heritage, or work in English with the potential of a much

wider audience – minus your natural audience." (Revealingly, she does not mention French, even though she goes on to refer to Canada's two official languages.) There is also the "nostalgia factor" and its conundrums for immigrant writers to negotiate, she points out. Their own cultural communities can be so starved for anything evocative of "home" and the valuing of its traditions that artists can be constrained by the pressure to meet such expectations.

The dramatic metamorphosis of Canadian literature in the three decades since the 1971 declaration of the Multicultural Policy has brought many conflicts and challenges, but the very intensity of these conflicts points to the importance of this cultural domain in the shaping of public values. Drawing on her experience in directing the cultural portfolio of the Department of Multiculturalism, Judy Young observes that "literature is a field in which debates and questions about diversity, ethnicity, race and gender started earlier than in the other arts." One might add that these debates started earlier in literature than in most other academic fields of study as well. A primary reason for this is that, as Young suggests, the "inclusion or exclusion of writers and works" in literary canons is "based on value judgments which can be influenced by discrimination, racism, bias, ignorance." Another is that creative writers in most instances work outside the academy, producing writings not yet subjected to the regulative force of disciplinary formations. Their works are also widely disseminated, regularly reviewed and debated in the media, and among the general public. Thus literature can have a revisionary impact on reigning paradigms of knowledge, extending far beyond the field of literary criticism and scholarship.

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But are there distinctive values or characteristics associated with Canadian literature that have had a transformative impact beyond our borders, influencing not only Canadian citizens but also those in other countries? A good deal of evidence suggests that multiculturalism itself has developed as a value of this kind, in ways that have aroused much interest in other countries.

Canada "was thinking about globalism and pluralism, the possibilities of multiculturalism, long before the rest of us knew the terms existed," Pico Iyer writes in a June, 2002 article in *Harper's Magazine* on "the promise of the new Canadian fiction." Based on works such as Michael Ondaatjee's *The English Patient*, Ann Michael's *Fugitive Pieces*, Dennis Bock's *The Ash Garden*, and Neil Bissoondath's *Digging Up the Mountains,* Iyer concludes that "multiculturalism is far better handled by writers of fiction than writers of laws." Whereas "the administrator tries to push hundreds of thousands of people into a single category, the imaginative writer, the novelist, does the opposite, seeing how one individual can contain a hundred cultures."

Iyer contrasts multiculturalism "from below" as embodied in the "new" Canadian literature with government-sponsored multiculturalism "from above," accepting Bissoondath's dismissive critique of the latter. And of course, many of the award-winning authors nurtured in their apprenticeships by the Writing and Publication Program of Canada's Department of Multiculturalism have been keen critics of the limitations of Canada's "official multicultural" policies. However, one might argue that it is precisely this dialectical engagement between a multiculturalism managed "from above" and a questioning, conflicted diversity "from below" (generated by writers, readers and their communities) that has transformed a matter of official policy into a dynamic entity and a host of innovative new artistic practices.

Some might also question the ways in which Iyer's globalizing vision glosses over revitalizing and/or intractable cultural differences. Yet from his stance outside Canada, he does offer a perspective on what Canadian authors, nurtured by an infrastructure supporting new voices and diversity in the arts, have achieved, and the importance of that achievement in a global context. In *The English Patient*, for example, Iyer finds an "attempt to chart a new kind of identity outside the categories of the Old World's order," in the representation of an assortment of "post-national souls" coming together in temporary refuge from a world in which people are being killed on the basis of their religion or the passport they carry or fail to carry. Had Iyer read Thomas King's "Borders," he might have found a similar attempt to chart a new kind of identity, though whether inside or outside the categories of a world order is more difficult to say.

If Canadian multiculturalism is now increasingly studied in Europe as a model for the challenges facing the European Union, or in the Middle East as a template for accommodating religious and ethnic differences, or in Sri Lanka, as a means for resolving civil strife, it is thus in part because Canadian writers have disseminated a new vision of the possible. Their works embody cultural diversity valued both as a lived practice, and as previously unimagined form of national identity. Iyer rightly stresses the importance of this vision, observing that "in America and Europe, by and large, multiculturalism is seen as merely a fact of life; in Canada it is often seen, and treated, as an opportunity." For that reason, he comments, "anyone who pays attention to contemporary fiction will see that, on the page at least, Canada is grappling with Act III of a global drama that is elsewhere only in its infancy."

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3. Naomi Klein, No Logo (Toronto: 2000).
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5. Pierre Trudeau, "The Values of a Just Society" in Pierre Trudeau and Tom Axworthy, eds., Towards a Just Society (Markham: 1990), 363.
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7. George de Benedetti, "Reflections on the Tenth Anniversary of the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement: What Has the FTA Meant for Canada?" in Michael J. Tucker, Raymond B. Blake, and P.E. Bryden, eds., Canada and the New World Order (Toronto: 2000), esp. 156-7; and 160.
8. Leo Driedger, Race and Ethnicity 2nd ed. (Toronto: 2003), ch. 4.
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1. By recording and measuring the distribution of teacher attention, the use of gender-specific examples (in textbook illustrations, for example), gender stereotypes, outright put-downs as well as a host of other overt and more discrete vehicles of learning, Myra and David Sadker (Sadker & Sadker, 1994) attempt to demonstrate that students learn that males and their concerns are more important. While "cheating" or short-changing girls, these practices – and the values they communicate – also make up the "miseducation" of boys. Naturally, these claims are disputed. For example, Christina Hoff Sommers (Sommers, 2001 <2000>) argues that boys in fact are poorly served by the education system, a fact borne out in their lower scores and higher drop-out rates.
2. Policy considerations aside, individual students and student groups also resist the dominant culture of the education system. One example is the creation of Muslim Student Associations by Muslims high school students to fight against discrimination, to enjoy mutual support, and to lobby the administration for consideration of specific religious needs (an unused classroom for prayer, for example) (Zine, 2000).
3. James Banks, perhaps the most prolific author on multicultural education, lists the five dimensions of multicultural education: 1. Content Integration (including information about women or minority cultures in history classes for example); 2. Knowledge Construction (teaching students how knowledge is created and how it reflects bias of the creator's social class, race, gender, etc.); 3. Prejudice Reduction (programs to combat racism); 4. Equity Pedagogy (introducing teaching techniques and methods of assessment that ensure equality for all students); and 5. An Empowering School Culture (changing grouping practices, student labeling, the social climate of school, and staff expectations so that all students feel equal and empowered) (Banks 1995, 4-10).
4. Canadian debates on inclusive schooling and multicultural education follow those in the United States and the United Kingdom (Moodley, 1995). However, there are debates on similar issues in every pluralist society.
5. For an example involving Muslim students, see Zine 2001.

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