DELIGHTING IN
Multicultural Communication

BY Alexandre Sévigny

AS CANADIANS, WE LIVE IN A FREE AND AFFLUENT SOCIETY BLESSED WITH WEALTH AND THE SOLIDARITY OF ITS CITIZENS. WE ARE DIVERSE, WE ARE PEACEFUL AND WE HAVE, FOR THE MOST PART, A TENDENCY TO ESPOUSE THE IDEALS OF JUSTICE AND EQUALITY. HOWEVER, ALL IS NOT PERFECT IN OUR SOCIETY. WE ARE OFTEN FRAUGHT WITH AN ANXIETY BROUGHT UPON US BY AN ECONOMIC SYSTEM WHICH ENCOURAGES PRECARIOUSNESS AND A SENSE OF INSECURITY. WE ARE TOLD OF THE INSUFFICIENCY OF OUR PRODUCTIVITY AND THAT THE VERY FACT THAT WE FEEL INSECURE IS A SIGN OF OUR HAVING BEEN CODDLED AND PAMPERED. IN FACT, THE STEADY MOVEMENT TOWARDS A MORE MATERIALLY-DIVIDED SOCIETY ORIENTED TOWARDS THE INDIVIDUAL QUITE OFTEN LEAVES US WITH A SENSE OF EXCLUSION, ALIENATION OR ANXIETY BRED OF INSECURITIES REGARDING OUR IDENTITY. THIS HAVING BEEN SAID, WE SHOULD BE PROUD OF OUR SPECIFICITY, A SPECIFICITY WHICH HAS PERMITTED US TO CREATE OUTLETS FOR OUR IMAGINATION, OASES THAT OUR QUIETLY EGALITARIAN AND PRAGMATIC DEMOCRACY HAS ENGENDERED WHICH PERMIT US THE INTELLECTUAL BREATHING ROOM NECESSARY FOR A REASONED SALVE OF THESE WORRIES. ONE SUCH SPACE IS THE NETWORK OF MULTICULTURAL COMMUNICATIONS OUTLETS THAT ARE AVAILABLE TO PERMIT US TO DELIGHT IN OUR DIVERSITY AND IN *OURSELVES*.

What does it mean to delight? To delight in something is to enjoy it without fear of reprisal, without having to meet others' expectations and requirements. To delight is to be free. To delight is to observe and share without judgement or reserve because one feels safe and that one can trust one's interlocutors. It is not a complicated experience because it describes a simple human desire: to revel in one's surroundings, to feel at peace to enjoy, discover and share. Where can we find this experience in a society that is dominated by an overwhelming sense of urgency, speed and anxiety? Where is the place one can go to escape the cacophony of everyday feelings of domination and busyness and feel free?

To many of us who grew up in the culturally diverse suburbs of Toronto, multiculturalism seemed a natural development, a joyful outgrowth of the desire for freedom bubbling through the veil of xenophobia. So convinced were we of this truth that we felt it to be completely natural, the only way to be. The policy of multiculturalism was perhaps still a novelty for our parents and their contemporaries, but it was all we knew. We participated in a sort of guileless joyful sharing that we didn't know represented a new way of doing things. It is only when I am exposed to the official cultural situation which preceded the cultural experience of my family that I am reminded that hybridity and transculturalism was not always the norm.

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One of the joys of growing up of mixed heritage (French-Canadian and Macedonian, in my case) in a city – Toronto – that defines itself by its very hybridity was being able to glimpse into other cultures and feel that we were all participating in the same discursive universe. Toronto's multicultural media and multicultural festivals formed for us a metagrammar for our Torontonian culture which allowed us to participate in its complicated cultural networks at any level that we wanted. Indeed, one can think of Toronto as a complicated multidimensional network where nodes can be connected in myriad constellations (although I am certain that my collegues in computational linguistics and artificial intelligence would say that many more dimensions are necessary to capture relationships of such complexity) where we were able to travel from node to node without fretting or giving it a second thought. We were a group of friends that came from 15 different backgrounds, spoke at least 25 languages among us and navigated in the waters of cultural hybridity as though all of those cultures belonged to us, as if we were everything at once. We ate each other's foods, listened to each other's music and watched each other's television. On weekends, our multi-ethnic group of friends would spend afternoons at each other's houses, feasting on whatever ethnic delectable the host house had to offer. Strains of ethnic music would waft in from the radio and from the television. Copies of non-anglophone newspapers would litter coffee tables, so much so, that seeing newsprint in Arabic, Russian, Macedonian, Italian, Farsi, Urdu, Portugese, Chinese or Korean was commonplace to us.

This world was made available to us because of Toronto's multicultural communications infrastructure. I remember it was small, it was inadequate, it was crammed into the early morning and on the weekend, but it existed and it bound us together, made us sophisticated, hybridized us, and inoculated us against many of the tribulations and fights that we heard happening around us. God knows, there was racism. There were certainly racial comments, but quite often they were uttered in the mould of sophisticated familiarity, the mould of those who have a secret knowledge and confidence about race that meant that we knew something that those who would teach us manners didn't have a clue about. We knew the score on interculturalism because we were surrounded by it. Our own hybridity was the organic product of contact and the anarchy of the school yard, the chaos of the youngster's world. When we heard of people legislating concepts of difference we were bemused because *we were difference.* I am white, I am Catholic, I am a man, and yet the types and features which categorize me as a hegemon are alien to me. I feel no kinship with the stereotype of the "white man". In fact, I would say that there is no white man left in my generation of kids that grew up in the multicultural 'burbs in Toronto. I have a sneaking suspicion that such classificatory abstractions are in fact notational conveniences of the bureaucratic and the bureaucratically-minded that have been appropriated and expanded by those who would use them to their own benefit. I hope that in the future, the classificatory system for racial, ethno-cultural and sexual victimization will find itself in the dustbin of history beside its close cousin, phrenology.

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It was in this free arena for the exchange of ideas, mores and motivations that we forged our Canadian identity. We became transcultural hybrids, and in so doing joined a new entity, a sort of conceptual blend (in the sense of Mark Turner or Gilles Fauconnier's use of the term), called Canadian culture in which we were comfortable and felt a sense of belonging. What is required for the development of a Canadian identity truly based on equality and justice is a free and open forum where all concepts can be aired, enjoyed and shared. The expansion of public-access programming and multicultural programming that focusses on the ideas and things that can be shared, and not the creation of a balkanized airwaves is the direction which ought to be taken. This sharing, this unalienated diversity, this overcoming of the dichotomy of the other and the self, is an instance of what might be termed blended particularism. As humans, if we think in terms of meanings and mappings between meanings (or meaning spaces), why should our appreciation of culture and ethnicity be otherwise? Why should we define our cultural appartenance in a sortal hierarchy where the arcs connecting the nodes in the graph are labelled and weighted? For this is what the exhaustive labelling that happens in society amounts to – a taxonomy, fit for describing humans as animals, but woefully insufficient for describing human existence in society.

Multicultural communication in Toronto provided this space for us. As is the case with most immigrants, my

mother's family arrived from what is now the Republic of Macedonia after a brief hiatus in Cairo, Egypt. In many conversations during the wonderful Slavas (parties that are organized on the day of the family's Saint-protector) and the warm weekly family gatherings we enjoyed, I gained an intimate perspective on what gave these people an identity and a sense of self. I was given an insight into the complex practice of cultural redefinition and adaptation, the moment of contact and the cognitive workspace that multicultural communications provided for them. The Macedonian radio programme, television journal and the various print publications which were produced locally formed a cognitive workspace which allowed people to escape not only from the corset of a majority culture which often baffled them, but also from the system of economic organization which was vehicled by that majority culture. Now, when I speak of majority culture, I am not speaking of the Anglo-Saxon culture which was practised in the homes of our neighbours of Northern European extraction; I am referring, rather, to the popular culture of the media, a beast quite distinct in its shallow focus on image, one-dimensional solutions to complex interpersonal problems, and an image of body and soul that matched no one that I could recognize, regardless of their cultural or ethnic background. Multicultural communications provided a respite which gave these newcomers the confidence to deal with the majority culture and feel as though there was something which its deadening commercial embrace couldn't touch.

Music transmitted over the radio and the internet formed a sonic space which allowed immigrants to forget cares and focus on a space that is theirs, in which they are free and equal, not burdened by material desires. It is, in fact a formless place which transcends desire because in that thought-space, the rules of society are entirely changed. They are psychological, esthetic, forming a sort of utopia within which people can dream and travel, dance and laugh. It is a space which is hermetical to those around them, whatever their ethnicity may be. Pressures are reduced because there is no one to impinge on the personal world of the listener. I find it a startling irony that when driving on the highway, surrounded by the fruits of industry, surrounded by others driven by time and purpose, one can feel free in one's sonic space. In fact, it is ironic that this freedom is not an illusion but an extension of the cognitive workspace I mentioned earlier, a place separate from the discourses which judge, challenge and oppress. In fact, that the choice of music played on the station is market-driven already distinguishes it from the choice of music offered via multicultural media, because, quite often those media chose music based on esthetic, folkloric, or political (not always very salubriously political) parameters. Eventually, as the demographics of our country change and the cultural hybridization that we are currently experiencing becomes more and more engrained and definitive, the market-driven radio stations will offer content that will more resemble what is currently offered over multicultural radio. However, there will be a difference. The message and the signification of the music will change, just as knowledge that is generated from corporations is a different commodity than knowledge generated by universities. It becomes classified, categorized, organized and packaged. Something that most home-grown locally-produced Canadian Multicultural content is not. Again, I should emphasize that watching Deutsch-Welle or Al-Jazeera does not qualify as Canadian multicultural communication for me. I define it as multicultural ideas produced by Canadians, *about Canada*, but from the myriad perspectives of our myriad cultures. I think that an excellent example of this sort of multicultural communication is the beautiful synthetic vision that aboriginal communications networks have of self and interaction with the multivariant Other.

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I remember the conversations that I listened to in the overheated living rooms of my family, the air harking back to Caïro's sandy warmth. These were conversations that centered around remembering, constructing a reality that would be a bridge, to join the alterity of the new situation in which they found themselves and the warmth of the past familiar, all the while trying to avoid falling into the icy waters of identity-chaos. They found in each other oases and encouragement. They were conversations that existed outside of the self and revelled in descriptions of the Other. This constant interplay between self and other and the innate sense of togetherness that they felt as immigrants with other immigrants led to much investigation of the variety of multicultural options available to be observed, tried and enjoyed. Canadian culture was a metagrammar which permitted the creation of a new self-defining and quite organically-constructed cultural lexicon which obeyed the universal principles of cognitive organization such as justice, art, colour, emotion, vision, etc. but permitted the generation of an infinite quantity of permutations, possibilities

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which could lead us to a deeper level of mutual understanding and harmony provided they are not beaten back by those who fear this change.

Quite often those who fear this change come from within multicultural groups themselves. There are conservative elements who would retard this progress towards universalization, interconnection and blending, elements who would reduce the possiblity of hybridization, or who would take advantage of the freedom and relative lack of regulation of Canadian multicultural communication to import battles from their homelands, to spread zizania and hatred among the Canadian people, to spread and promote an ideology here rather than open up to the possibilities of hybridization that this country offers. To try and preserve the "old country culture" is a fallacy, for often that culture is an artefact, fossilized upon entry into Canada, no longer even particularly connected to the old country. A solution seems obvious: use Canada's multicultural communications infrastructure to educate the people belonging to that group in the evolving ways of the old country. But this is a strange shibboleth: it in fact constitutes a sort of colonization of the immigrant by his or her past, making them all prisoners of history, victims of their parents' attachments and connections to their country of origins. In fact, multicultural Canadian communications should predominently be a forum for pragmatic sharing of ideas and norms amongst *Canadians*. As such, the blended concept of the hyphenated Canadian must be distinct from the concept described by the first half of the hyphenated identity. The actual political and social situation of the source country ought to be irrelevant in this cognitive thought-space because the ties of culture that bind individuals to their place of origin and to their home cannot be captured in language of social or political thought. It is a deep emotional and esthetic connection, a sort of metaphysical thing that has roots in the person's inner life; its realities can only be expressed in the person's inner language.

The sense of delight that one has in enjoying a quiet moment, the loss of a sense of time that one experiences when one watches the waves of Lake Ontario lapping upon the rocks at Ashbridges Bay, surrounded by one's friends, surrounded by humanity under the sun. Senses dulled by the warmth of the afternoon sun, one can listen to the gentle symphony of different languages looking at the same scene and yet conceptualising it differently. Enjoying peace and prosperity and enriching the national fabric by expressing esthetic nuances and sharing them in the common language (English) so that it is enriched and grows. The blending of these different cognitive spaces forms a coherent one which is unique, peaceable and just, and which represents us in our variety and in our unity. This is the journey which multicultural communication leads us upon. It is exciting and ever-evolving. It is comforting and not alienating. It is the ideal of Western civilization in its highest expression, for as Terence said: "Nothing human is alien to me". I think that Canada, because of an infrastructure that was put up by several visionary people in the 70s, has an extraordinary advantage in this search for harmony. For we have already discovered, in our mental spaces, defined and blended in delighting in one another, that it is not a competition but a state of being and a state of mind. One that is not alien to us.

I have often wondered if a country, like Canada, which guarantees the fundamental liberties of the individual and permits and values the expression and practice of a great diversity of cultural traits might not be the perfect observatory for the sort of cultural paradigm shift which would permit us to move closer to a somewhat extended notion of blended particularism.

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However, this does not mean that the task is complete. We must strive to further democratize access to media, to further enrich *Canadian multicultural* content as opposed to colonial multicultural content that comes to us from elsewhere. For just as the English Canadian component of the media suffers from a sometimes suffocating American presence, so too can our multicultural channels be used by other nations to influence Canadians, to spread hatred, to divide us and weaken our resolute commitment to justice, liberty, equality and peace. Our multicultural programming must be made in Canada by Canadians. When we forge this new infrastructure, when we make communications in Canada truly reflective of lived experience, not only will we assure our future prosperity, peace and solidarity, but we will live our commonalities and grow out of our past.

Dr. Alexandre Sévigny is an Assistant Professor in Communication Studies & French Linguistics at the Faculty of Humanities, McMaster University