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## BEYOND MULTICULTURALISM: AUSTRALIA AND CANADA

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'However one precisely defines it, [multiculturalism's] essence is mutual respect for, and general tolerance of, the different national, racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds and cultures from which we come.' - Governor Sir William Deane, speaking in defence of multiculturalism (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 July 1998, p16)

Six months ago an important policy paper was launched by John Howard, the Prime Minister of Australia. It was called 'Multicultural Australia: The Way Forward' and the key question it asked was 'Is multiculturalism an appropriate term to describe a policy for managing cultural diversity or has it outlived its usefulness?' (see Sheridan, 13). Considering that the paper was about multiculturalism, Howard's speech on that occasion was remarkable in that he managed to avoid using 'the dreaded "M" word'. His much publicised aversion to the word is apparently shared by President Bill Clinton who, 'in a keynote speech on immigration last month in the US...didn't use the word multicultural once'. (Kelly, 13) Apparently there is also an official retreat from the word and the policy in Canada<sup>1</sup>. This is borne out by a number of the papers at this conference, notably Audrey Kobayashi's, and reinforced in the literary sphere, by Smaro Kamboureli's 1996 collection *Making a difference: Canadian multicultural literature*, a book that shows many signs of unease about it. As a

Ukrainian Australian living and working within the multicultural framework, I have reaped the benefits, with my family, of multicultural policies in Australia over the past two decades. Life has changed in tangible and practical ways, particularly for my parents whose early years in Australia as post-war refugees were marked by routine prejudice and discrimination. Further, I have seen multicultural policies working well in Canada, a country I have recognised, ever since I first began to go there fifteen years ago, as being far more advanced and committed than Australia to cultural diversity. That is why I am interested in these gestures of rejection and want to use them as a starting point for considering the apparent crisis in multiculturalism and for asking how it is faring as a concept for 'framing' cultural diversity, now that it is well tried and well worn in both Canada and Australia.

In Australia, multiculturalism has been a hot topic over the past two years in the context of the immigration debates sparked by the Hanson phenomenon. I am able, therefore, to draw upon my daily media diet of the topic for my comments about Australia, but for my view of the Canadian multicultural scene, I will use information gleaned from papers at this conference and also, as a kind of visible symptom of the crisis, Kamboureli's collection. My special interest is in the politics of multiculturalism, not as specific policies in the two countries, but as an aspect of 'evolving' postcolonial theories of difference and otherness at this critical moment in history.

Is multicultural still the appropriate term to use then, or should we, following Clinton and Howard, get rid of it? Kamboureli's book implicitly raises the question by presenting such a rich feast of cultural and literary diversity in action that the concept of multiculturalism is itself stretched to encompass histories, geographies, identities and cultures reaching into every 'corner' of the globe and back into past centuries. In one sense, then, her model of national multiculturalism begins to mesh with global models of trans-cultural interaction. Yet, in another sense, the literary samples and the short biographies presented alongside them, scatter into discrete individual fragments whose significance lies in their refusal to be contained by any unitary frame. And there is no doubt that the scattering dynamic wins out, leaving the multicultural tag with nothing to attach itself to. No wonder the word multicultural is used sceptically or ironically or avoided altogether in the mini-biographies that are as alluring in this volume, for the glimpses they offer into multiple worlds, as the stories and poems themselves. But for all that, it is still multiculturalism, as a productive and interactive pluralism, that energises this book.

Does it matter that all these stories that Kamboureli has collected under the banner of multiculturalism keep slipping out from under it? Should we try to shepherd them in again? Should we defend the term or let it go? My answer is that the term should be kept, at least until we can think of something better. I say that not because the demise of the term would itself be necessarily worrying. There is nothing sacred about it. What is worrying is the *hiatus* it would leave. This is dangerous because it weakens the system and presents an opportunity for wild ideas to take root. It creates a space for bigotry and for cynical manipulations of cultural discourses. In Australia this is precisely what is already happening, and I am not referring *only* to the One Nation

party. The hiatus caused by the official retreat from multiculturalism has allowed the language of difference and diversity to be hijacked by the Prime Minister's own shifty and simplistic rhetoric of a 'fair go' for all so-called 'ordinary' and 'decent' Australians. As one journalist put it, reporting on the 'Way Forward' launch, 'Howard's speech was etched in the 1950s'. (*The Australian*, Dec 12, 3) This is the danger then of abandoning the 'M' word too soon. It is not only the wild rhetoric of Pauline Hanson's racism that is excitedly filling the space, it is also the equally dangerous – probably more dangerous – language of platitudinous common sense.

The 'Way Forward' paper was one of many recent markers of a deeply disturbing trend in Australia's image of itself as a nation, one that is emerging ever more strongly through the media.<sup>2</sup> Over the past year, the current coalition government has increasingly stepped away from the multiculturalist principles that had been embraced by the former Labor governments, and at the same time, from active support for Aboriginal Australians (see Sheridan as one of innumerable examples over the past year). The shift is being carefully stage-managed and marketed in terms of 'sensibly' evaluating what is best for 'ordinary Australians'. However, this does not mask the fact that there is nothing offered to replace the multiculturalism – as national policy and as a concept – that is now under such severe pressure in Australia, as it also appears to be in Canada, where the term was invented in the late 1960s by Pierre Trudeau<sup>3</sup> (Woodley, 4). Strangely, in Australia it is under siege from both extremes of the political spectrum and this makes it a very confusing and volatile idea to work with in the current climate. This, of course, also makes it difficult to rescue. While traditional champions of multiculturalism have been disillusioned with it because of its failure to stem the tide of racism in Australia (and for other reasons), and also because it has been seen as a 'white Anglo supremacist discourse' by some (see Gunew), the highly conservative federal government of the 1990s clearly *fears* it as a threat to the coherence of Australia's identity, conceived nostalgically by the Howard coalition government in terms of the proud tradition built around the settler rural culture, essentially the British colonial culture. Intensifying the debate and the confusion are two key players that are highly visible in the current political arena, locked in a head-on confrontation and egged on by every arm of the national media. They are the Aboriginal lobby on the one hand and the emergent extremist One Nation party on the other.

Aboriginal groups have consistently chosen to position themselves outside of the multicultural umbrella. They have never seen it as serving them. In fact, they have not *wanted* it to serve them since they see their claims, as the original inhabitants of Australia, as quite distinct from those of immigrants. One Nation, on the other hand, makes no special distinctions: it is equally hostile to the claims of Aboriginal and immigrant peoples (especially those from Asia) for a major role in the reconfiguration of Australia's cultural identity for the next century and for the republic. Not surprisingly, this move has thrown multiculturalism and Aboriginality together, like it or not, into the same political camp, both on the 'other' side, the side working against the barons – of government and of the media. And this uncomfortable

conjunction complicates further the question of whether multiculturalism is still the right approach for managing cultural diversity effectively.

I would suggest that although Kamboureli's collection draws upon very different contexts, and different multiculturalisms, it nevertheless raises this same general question and offers some useful answers. In particular, the collection crystallises the strategic importance of the multicultural banner over two decades for writers in both countries. Its answer for Canada to the key question raised by Howard's paper in Australia is a qualified 'yes'. The collection carries important messages for Australia in the light of Canadian experience as seen through the eyes of its writers. The central message, as I read it, is that multiculturalism, like this volume itself, 'creates a space in which contributors... might dialogue with each other, without suspending their differences' (1). That dialogue is at once a celebration of differences and a composite counter-discourse that constantly debates with the dominant discourse and will not leave it alone, will not let that space fall out of its own control. What the book shows us is that if multiculturalism is strong enough and flexible enough it will not let its language and principles be hijacked. It will instead take charge of its own processes of change and even of its own disappearance when the time is right. This book could well be a sign that this scenario is closer in Canada than it is in Australia. But it is not there yet. As Kamboureli states,

Canadian Multicultural Literature [is] in some respects, one word too many. For Canadian literature is, should be thought of as, reflecting the multicultural make-up of the country. That I feel compelled to spell this out, that I do so when, for example, some of the contributors to this anthology have won some of the most coveted Canadian literary prizes, suggests that Canadian literature – Canadian literature as an institution – is still not as diverse as it should be... *Making a difference* intends to reflect the changed – and changing – state of cultural affairs in Canada. (1,2)

What changes does the volume reflect? First by casting the multicultural net so widely the book performs an ironic act of excess that undermines and almost dissolves the category that frames it, but not quite. In other words, its multiculturalism performs the paradoxical feat of growing and disappearing at the same time. In the process, the collection confirms another important change. This change reflects a promising and productive trend and one that I see as a powerful undercurrent influencing new postmodern understandings of multiculturalism or transculturalism (the term Kulyk-Keefer sees as more relevant to contemporary global social politics – see the paper 'From Mosaic to Kaleidoscope'). This trend is driven neither by governments nor media magnates but by individual *writers* and, more specifically, by storytellers. Given scope and confidence initially by multicultural policies in both countries, writers from diverse cultural backgrounds are now casting aside the multicultural designation and are contributing to what I see

as a revolution in the way people in both countries are choosing to define their worlds, their values and their identities. If the word multiculturalism is harder than ever to contain or pin down, it is because it has been very busy on many fronts and is now being changed, by its triumphs, by its failures, but also by changes occurring around it. One of those is the massive change that I have described in a recent article as the 'biography revolution' (see Longley 1997). In other words, it is caught visibly in the processes of historical change. Kamboureli's book is caught, knowingly, in the same contradictory tangle that I can only begin to unravel here.

In the rest of this paper I will try to capture the historical moment that Kamboureli's anthology marks in the development of multiculturalism as a broad enabling concept, with a view to suggesting a 'way forward' which represents simultaneously a strengthening of multiculturalism's original core principles and a movement into a space beyond multiculturalism, where multiculturalism can be taken for granted. This is a space where concepts of national literary identity are at once more inclusive, more mobile and less anxious.

Historically, discussions about national identity in both Canada and Australia, have been about *common* features, about clustering together those aspects of culture that could bulk up a sense of distinctive unity against other bigger 'parent' cultures on the one hand – those of Britain or more broadly Europe – or against 'enemy' cultures – the United States, Japan, or more generally 'The Yellow Peril' (see Atwood, Frye, Palmer, and White). For unity to make sense, conspicuous differences obviously had to be submergled, with disastrous consequences for 'visible' minorities, especially indigenous peoples (in Canada the issue of cultural difference has consistently demanded more attention because of French Canada). There is no doubt that multicultural policy made a crucial contribution in both countries towards breaking that pattern of exclusion. So too did the specific policies affirming the rights of Indigenous populations. Both policies disrupted the homogenising identity machines – the controlling discourses – that determined the public face and socio-economic structure of each country and generated a myth of sameness. Most importantly, multiculturalism transformed *difference* into a positive quality at a time when, certainly in Australia, post-war assimilationist policies were fuelling racism and feeding an already entrenched belief in Anglo-Australian superiority over immigrants from all cultures other than British. But, of course the multicultural model did not provide all the solutions. It was and still is open to manipulation and abuse, as writers on the subject have noted repeatedly (for example, see Gunew & Longley; Kamboureli; and Schmidt).

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that the term multiculturalism, along with the policies it represents, is only as good as its *practice* in a particular context, and that any policy, however worthy its intentions, can become a cover for injustice and inhumanity. One only has to call to mind terms such as 'the protector of aborigines' or 'ethnic cleansing' to confirm this. And even a good policy, in broad human rights terms, can become destructive to those whom it serves, when pushed to its limits. It is easy to see how the policy of assimilation, for example, can be and indeed *was*

described positively in terms of cultural bestowing and welcoming while in fact providing a structure for the ruling group to 'swallow whole' the indigenous and incoming cultures. Similarly, while multiculturalism at its best accepts cultural difference, in its crudest extreme forms, it can also provide a structure for segregation, for the 'spitting out' of those 'other' cultures that threaten to embed themselves and thrive in the body of the nation. One metaphor implies a gesture of colonial greed while the other implies an expression of colonial disgust, whose logical extension is apartheid. Both, however, imply a controlling arbiter, a central figure, whether in Canada or Australia, who has the country's best interests at heart and under control, and in both countries that figure is still white and of British ancestry, in spite of decades of multiculturalism. In other words, multiculturalism has no *intrinsic* worth. As with any other 'ism', it all depends who is driving it and with what motives.

When one is immersed in the multiple worlds of the stories gathered in Kambourelis's collection, however, that kind of controlling figure looks irrelevant, anachronistic and marginal. Is it because it is the figure who is now left out, who is banging on the window, who has missed out on entering the domain of the multicultural, according to Kambourelis's strategically broad definition? While this is true, I do not believe that is the only reason. More importantly, in forcing attention on the infinity of 'differences' amongst the so-called 'different', the very idea of 'difference' from the 'mainstream' is dissolved into absurdity and the invisible implied category of the Anglo-Canadian suddenly looks very small, even marginal – a ghost. Are writers of British origin included, I began to wonder as I read, and I would not have been at all surprised to find them there. After all, this collection includes many of the country's most internationally renowned literary figures – from amongst first nations writers, from amongst relatively recent arrivals as well as those whose families have lived in Canada for several generations. What *are* the criteria for inclusion in this vast club? Ironically, this unprecedented inclusiveness embraces most of Canada and so makes 'multicultural' begin to look like a redundant category, as Kambourelis herself acknowledges.

The collection is useful in its capacity to expose these pressing and very current ironies and questions in relation to otherness and difference and so to mobilise a new phase in their strategic application. We have already passed through a number of stages in postcolonial theory relating to these issues. Kambourelis's volume provides a structure for both acknowledging and disposing of the familiar models they generated. These models become part of the armoury of postcolonial theory, available but not always necessary.

For the immigrant there was the oppressor/victim model which later developed into the more abstract spatial model of centre/margin. I was never comfortable with these configurations – probably because I didn't like the position they put *me* in – and so in the 1980s I wrote a paper called 'Between Literatures: Canada and Australia' (in *ARIEL*) which claimed the space in-between as a powerful space. I followed it up with 'Neither Here nor There' (in *New Literatures Review*) that tried to do the same, but with more desperation, since at the time I was between jobs, between homes and between

marriages. Many powerful theories have come out of models claiming power for those *below* or *outside* or *between* but I have always had my doubts about what they actually do for those who are living in those positions. I could never, for example make sense of them in relation to my immigrant parents. That is why I want to give credit where it is due for the *practical* outcomes of multiculturalism and why I want to celebrate the life-story-telling trend I can see reflected in Kambourelis's book and all around us in Australia. The trend wipes out the centre/margin, top/bottom, hierarchies and sidesteps the in-betweens, hybridities and ambivalences and instead asserts the power of the individual story, anyone's story, whether cast as truth or as fiction, told from anywhere. Strangely, it is the structure rather than the content of Kambourelis's book that exposes the myths of hierarchy and genre. There is no essential difference between the biographical fragments and the literary texts they introduce. Nor is there is any essential difference between these kinds of pieces of writing and those that *could* have been chosen, whether by Anglo-Canadian writers or not. They all tell stories, most of them autobiographical, and they all satisfy the same appetite for stories that is fed and stimulated daily, and to an unprecedented degree, by every part of the media – by newspapers, by television talk shows, by the world wide web, by talk-back radio, by films, by soaps, and by popular magazines for glimpses of other people's lives. I suggest that this phenomenon, the explosion of interest in 'bionarratives' (see Longley 1998), provides a positive and encouraging explanation for the diminishing force of the term multicultural for collections such as Kambourelis's and the tiredness of the centre/margin model and its variations in the vocabulary of cultural difference. That is not to say that we should not keep watch on multicultural policies. There is an urgent need to do so, especially in Australia right now. However, in the area of writing/story-telling, as Kambourelis's book demonstrates, consciously or not, multiculturalism is swamped by the act of story-telling itself, an act which is at once highly individual and very general, culture-specific and yet 'universal'. No one asks whether the stories come from the centre or the margins. They are coming from nowhere and everywhere. They are, in a new sense, multicultural in that they express a wider concept of diversity that includes and absorbs multicultural principles.

Finally, I want to say that multicultural policies need to be acknowledged for their role in helping to create the conditions for this revolution. But nothing stands still. 'Events come to you from the opposite direction in time', as Baudrillard puts it, 'from the depths of their past occurrence'. And theories too, 'from the depths of their accomplishment, which is also their end, as in a film run backwards'. (131) Just as with other affirmative action strategies, the clearest evidence of multiculturalism's success will be its unforced disappearance as a term, not as a practice. For multiculturalism is a fact of life now in Canada and in Australia. The challenge is to protect and encourage the cultural diversity it has stood for in the face of the rate of loss of traditional languages and with them, cultural memory, amongst Indigenous and immigrant groups in both countries.

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## Notes

- 1 Brian Aboud, in his paper, 'Controlling Migration, Controlling Diversity: Perspectives on Canada and Australia' presented at the conference 'Diversity in Australia, Canada and New Zealand: Challenges and Opportunities' (Macquarie University, July 9-11) pointed out that Québec had gone further than the rest of Canada in articulating its identity in a unified way, as Australia also has. At the same conference, Elliot Tapper, in his paper 'Dimensions of Diversity in Canada', made the point that while Canada is an increasingly diverse society, public policy needs to keep supporting this. He also pointed out that multicultural policy is seen by many to be 'divisive'.
- 2 Recently, for example, an Australian citizen of Malaysian background sued a candidate standing for a national political party for allegedly saying that he wished he was back in the 1940s because 'with such people [presumably Asians], you'd put them up against a wall and shoot them'. (Balogh, 4).

- 3 See also *The Menace of Multiculturalism: Trojan Horse in America* (Schmidt), which presents multiculturalism as a dire threat to the American way, using chapter headings such as 'Multiculturalism threatens the family'.