

## Rewriting Home--Canadian Multiculturalism

By Danielle Wilson

My master's thesis studied the concept of home and representations of newcomer experiences in Canadian literature. My study focused on the work of Dionne Brand, a prominent Canadian poet, novelist, critic, and activist. She immigrated to Canada at the age of 17 in 1970 from Trinidad. Currently the poet laureate of Toronto, Brand has published several award-winning poetry collections and novels, including the Governor General's award-winning *Land to Light On*. In order to frame her interrogations of home as a concept and the ways that home is or isn't available to Brand and her characters, I did extensive research on Canadian multiculturalism and national identity. Read alongside the history and evolution of multiculturalism in Canada, Brand's work offered me both a critical and a personal response to Canadian multiculturalism policies and the viability of Canadian home-spaces.

To begin, I'd like to offer a history of multiculturalism in this country, then talk briefly about the concept of home and national identity, and finally offer some comments on the future of multiculturalism in Canada.

Multiculturalism can be something of an amorphous term. Sometimes people use it simply to describe the demographic makeup of this country, the very reality of our diverse society. It might mean simply the existence of visible minorities and high levels of immigration. It might mean cultural pluralism, the presence in Canada of people with diverse ethnocultural backgrounds. Or, multiculturalism can mean a social ideal, an image of society defined by inter-cultural exchanges and respect for difference. My own interest has been in how the nation deals with the multicultural reality of this country as federal public policy and especially the role this response has played in the construction of a national myth, the imagined community of Canada.

Canada's official multiculturalism policy was announced by Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau on October 8<sup>th</sup>, 1971. The policy emerged directly from the findings of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism. The commission was born in response to Quebec's Quiet Revolution, but also from the post-war search for identity in English Canada. The commission was primarily tasked with investigating relations between the "two founding races," the British and the French, but they were also charged with "taking into account the contribution made by the other ethnic groups to the cultural enrichment of Canada and the measures that should be taken to safeguard that contribution." In response to the commission and this emphasis on the "two founding races," Canadians from established European ethnic communities in Canada, particularly Ukrainian-Canadians, came forward to reject the idea that they were somehow less Canadian than the British and the French. These Canadians, the commission agreed, had retained cultural and linguistic links to their heritage without compromising their ability to be fully Canadian (often in the face of strong Anglo-assimilationist policies). In its final report, the commission declared that Canada was immeasurably enriched by the presence of diverse cultural groups and recommended recognizing cultural pluralism as essential to Canadian identity, as well as providing a number of institutional recommendations. The result of these recommendations was the Official Multiculturalism Policy.

The policy did not create a multicultural society either as a social (demographic) reality or as an effectively egalitarian, culturally respectful society (by which I mean it didn't eliminate racism or discrimination based on ethnocultural background). Cultural pluralism was already a Canadian reality, as evidenced by the results of the commission. What the policy did create, however, was the idea of multiculturalism as central to Canadian identity. It celebrated the diversity of Canadian life as a social ideal and introduced a federal policy meant to encourage the diversity of society. The effect on the Canadian imagination – whatever the weaknesses of the reality – cannot be overstated. The myth of national unity, as it exists in Canada today, celebrates our common and shared migrant origins; however, it's important to recognize that this wasn't always the case. In the national project of myth-making – of creating an imagined community – Canadians can tend to read backwards into our history the identity we share today. I mention this because, though immigration has always shaped our country dramatically, we can't allow our current celebration to over-write the experiences and policies of the past. We can't forget the brutal assimilationist practices, particularly against Canada's indigenous peoples (some of which coexisted with official multiculturalism), or the racist immigration laws that persisted until the mid to late 60s. I mention this because of the popular myth that Canada has always been a multicultural society – in the sense of multiculturalism as a celebration of diversity. Such myths over-write the injustices of the past, and, bizarrely, this backwards reading is also used against some cultural groups today.

As an aside, but one I find truly fascinating, I'd like to mention briefly the parallels between past anxieties and present anxieties about integration. Both Michael Adams, founder of Environics Research Group and author of *Unlikely Utopia*, and Will Kymlicka, a professor of philosophy at Queen's and widely recognized as an international expert on multiculturalism, parallel anxieties about European Catholic immigrants in the past and contemporary anxieties about Muslim newcomers. Many concerns about immigration and multiculturalism today look back nostalgically on earlier waves of immigration. The argument goes something like "we didn't worry about earlier waves because newcomers were coming from the same cultural and religious traditions as the British and French" (read: European, Christian). Today, the argument contrasts, newcomers from Africa and Asia are from very different religious, political, and cultural traditions, so they'll have a harder time integrating into social and political life in Canada (Adams 52). But, Europeans Catholics were as much of a concern to the Canadians of the past as Muslims are to the editorial writers of today. Kymlicka explains, European Catholics were seen as "undemocratic and unpatriotic because their allegiance was to the Pope, and as separatist because they demanded their own schools. The fear that Catholics would not integrate took many years to disappear; yet today they are seen as a vital component of the mainstream society into which Muslims are allegedly not integrating" (*Finding Our Way* 55). Rejecting these nostalgic backwards readings is important for acknowledging our past, but it's also important for putting current anxieties into a historical perspective.

In the decade after Trudeau's speech, almost \$200 million was invested in language and culture promotion. In 1973, the Ministry of Multiculturalism was established for implementing multiculturalism policies within government departments. 1982 saw the inclusion of multiculturalism in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and the Multiculturalism Act was instituted in 1988.

From the very earliest stages of official multiculturalism – and the argument persists today – one of the main critiques of multiculturalism is the complaint that it segregates by focusing on differences instead of commonalities. In fact, the policy has always focused on social and civic participation<sup>11</sup>, and this focus has only increased over time. Nevertheless, there are many legitimate critiques of multiculturalism policy during the first decades of its implementation, and many of the problems centred on the stark difference between federal policy and the lived experience of newcomers to Canada. After the last racially discriminatory barriers to immigration were removed in 1967, visible minorities were increasingly arriving in Canada and finding multiculturalism as an inadequate resource for social justice. Dionne Brand’s first two novels are partially set in Toronto in the 70s and 80s. Her work presents a strong condemnation of the limited possibilities offered her Afro-Caribbean characters. Canada’s conventional status as utopian escape – ironic since its first use in antebellum slave narratives – is debunked in Brand’s work by exploring some of the racist and sexist underpinnings of Canadian society. For her characters, Canada is a space of alienation, invisibility, and unbelonging. Her first novel, *In Another Place, Not Here*, remains one of the most moving works I’ve ever read. The novel takes the Canadian myth of tolerance to task by demonstrating the ways that racial discrimination and alienation make Canada as a home impossible for her characters. Significantly, the contrast between the social ideal/public policy of multiculturalism and the lived reality of racism, discrimination, and limited educational and employment opportunities for newcomers were important influences on the evolution of the Canadian multiculturalism policy.

Beginning in the early 80s, Canadian multicultural policy shifted from the promotion of cultural and linguistic expression and maintenance to intercultural exchange, and most significantly, race relations and anti-discrimination measures. These shifts were largely influenced by changing immigration trends and the needs being expressed by ethnocultural groups. Their main concerns were no longer cultural maintenance and expression, but rather employment, education, and discrimination. The mid-90s produced a re-evaluation of multicultural policy and a rearticulation of four priorities. These priorities were 1) Fostering Cross-Cultural Understanding; 2) Combating Racism and Discrimination; 3) Civic Participation; and 4) Making Canadian Institutions More Reflective of Canadian Diversity. Today, the Multiculturalism Program operates within the Department of Citizenship and Immigration. In the department’s Annual Report on the on the Operation of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act 2009-2010, the report identified three new objectives: “building an integrated, socially cohesive society; making institutions more responsive to the needs of Canada’s diverse population; and, engaging in international discussions on multiculturalism and diversity.” The program remains focused on promoting inter-cultural and inter-faith understanding, anti-racism and anti-discrimination education, and the socio-economic integration of new Canadians.

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<sup>11</sup> Trudeau’s speech articulated four objectives for Official Multiculturalism. 1) To “assist all Canadian cultural groups that have demonstrated a desire and effort to continue to develop a capacity to grow and contribute to Canada”; 2) To “assist members of all cultural groups to overcome cultural barriers to full participation in Canadian society”; 3) To “promote creative encounters and interchange amongst all Canadian cultural groups in the interest of national unity”; and 4) To “assist immigrants to acquire at least one of Canada’s official languages in order to become full participants in Canadian society.” Note that 2-4 include participation and communication as primary objectives.

Given some of the early problems with multicultural policies in Canada (the disconnect between the image of a tolerant nation and the reality of discrimination, and the policy's early inability to address issues of social justice), the greatest influence created by early adoption of multiculturalism was its effect on the Canadian imagination. Multiculturalism has become increasingly recognized and valued as an essential part of Canadian identity – sometimes in clichéd ways as in the difference between Canadian multiculturalism and the American melting pot, and sometimes in superficial ways that allowed Canadians to pat ourselves on the back while ignoring discrimination. Nevertheless, multiculturalism has become fundamental to the way Canadians self-identify and the effect has important implications for the way that Canada exists as a viable home for newcomers.

In his 2008-2010 Report on the Current State of Multiculturalism in Canada, Will Kymlicka states that there is much evidence that newcomers and visible minorities are integrating in Canada better than in any other country in the world, and that multiculturalism is a major factor in this success. Indeed, in an earlier study of what seems to make Canada unique in its successful multiculturalism policy relative to other countries, one of the characteristics he identifies is the incorporation of multiculturalism into Canadian identity (“Canadian Multiculturalism in Historical and Comparative Perspective”). Canada is not the only country in the world with a diverse population or the only country to adopt an official multiculturalism policy, but it is the only country that has made the reality and celebration of diversity intrinsic to national identity. Public polling gives us an idea of just how increasingly important multiculturalism is to the way Canadians self-identify. Since 1985, Environics has been asking Canadians to identify, in their own words, what makes them proud to be Canadian. In 1985, multiculturalism was in 10<sup>th</sup> place. In 2006, multiculturalism had climbed to second place behind only freedom and democracy (Adams 20). Though a Focus Canada poll in 2010 saw multiculturalism fall to 4<sup>th</sup> place (behind democracy, quality of life, and being a caring/humanitarian people), multiculturalism remains as one of the top reasons Canadians are proud of their country. Indeed, Adams explains in *Unlikely Utopia* that a 2003 survey revealed 85% of Canadians identify multiculturalism as important to Canadian identity; more important, he notes, than bilingualism or hockey (20). Additionally, an international Ipsos MORI survey in 2006 revealed that Canadians have the most positive attitudes about immigration in the world. 75% of Canadians believe that immigrants have a positive influence on the country while only 54% of Australians, the second highest country, agreed with the statement (Adams 13-16). Adams also notes that these positive attitudes have increased as Canada's immigration rates have increased (16).

Why is it so important that multiculturalism is part of national identity? And what effect does this have on feelings of belonging for newcomers to Canada? Sociologists have long argued that newcomers have more success in terms of social integration and psychological health when they're able to combine national and ethnic identities. On a personal level, multiculturalism offers a link between newcomers and Canadian-born citizens. Because multiculturalism is part of the definition of Canada, newcomers are already part of the country's national narrative. Canadians move from national identity and pride in country to connection with newcomers. Multiculturalism also provides a means for newcomers to identify with and feel part of Canada. As Kymlicka states in his report on multiculturalism, “Studies show that in the absence of multiculturalism, these links [between native citizens and newcomers, between newcomers and national identity] are more difficult to establish and national

identity is more likely to lead to intolerance and xenophobia.” Multiculturalism as part of Canadian identity means that newcomers and Canadian-born citizens work together to mutually inform, create, and sustain the national self-definition of Canada.

I don't mean to suggest that everything is perfect in Canada, that the disconnect between Canada's self-image and its reality doesn't persist in important ways, or that there aren't continued challenges and flaws in multiculturalism here. The economic frustrations of newcomers is a major problem today, one that has only worsened over the last few decades, and the disparity between the average income of some visible minority groups and the average income of Canadians is distressing. These problems should be read as indicators that multiculturalism in Canada – as a social ideal – is in process rather than completed, and the federal policy must correspondingly evolve as well.

A narrative about the failure of multiculturalism has gained prominence in Canada in part because of an international backlash against multiculturalism. In the narrative about the failure of multiculturalism, the argument about segregation and marginalization is as old as Canadian multiculturalism. The argument claims that multiculturalism separates and segregates cultural groups. It fractures national unity by underscoring difference and, in some arguments – most famously by Neil Bissoondath – it belittles the cultures it proposes to celebrate by reducing culture to food and performance. There is much evidence against this argument, particularly well-outlined in Kymlicka's report on the current state of multiculturalism in Canada. Even without turning to that evidence, it's important to note that this criticism hinges on government funding initiatives of early multiculturalism and not on the current focus on anti-discrimination and inter-cultural/inter-faith events and projects. Multiculturalism funding today supports the exchange not the isolation of cultures.

Arguments about the failure of multiculturalism in Canada tend to focus on the existence of ethnic enclaves as an example of the marginalization and segregation produced by multiculturalism policies. Indeed, we should be worried both about the socio-economic outcomes of newcomers to Canada and the high concentration of poverty among visible minority groups. We should also be worried about class segregation; that is, the segregation of low income Canadians regardless of ethnocultural background. But we don't need to conflate ethnic enclaves as they exist in Canada with the ghettos of France and Great Britain. A 2009 study of ethnic enclaves for Citizenship and Immigration Canada concluded that enclaves are internally ethnoculturally diverse (“Exploring minority enclave areas in Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver”). Particular ethnic groups aren't becoming isolated in homogenous, monocultural neighbourhoods.

As it has been for years in Canada, discrimination continues to be a focus of the federal multiculturalism program. One of the recent challenges has been not only the continued problem of racism in society, but also discrimination against religious groups, especially Muslims in Canada. We must be vigilant about the way that anti-Muslim sentiment and hysteria are presented in the media. I don't want to overstate what is, studies suggest, a fringe position, but as it's become part of the national narrative about multiculturalism, I will spend a few moments on these issues.

International backlash against multiculturalism – in Germany, the U.K., the Netherlands, etc. – has influenced commentary on multiculturalism in Canada today. Much of the international backlash is linked to Anti-Muslim sentiments, and the same is true of these arguments when applied to the Canadian context<sup>2</sup>. Public opinion polling demonstrates that Canada has weathered this international backlash more successfully than European countries. Through data collected in Adams' *Unlikely Utopia*, he argues that, compared to international polls, Canadian Muslims are less likely to perceive hostility toward their faith than Muslims in other Western countries, and Canadian Muslims express high levels of pride in the nation (98; 95). Despite this positive news, Adams also demonstrates that, though Canadian Muslims believe that their fellow Muslims want to integrate and adopt Canadian values, most Canadians (54% in 2010) doubt this (Focus Canada 2010). There's also evidence that Canadians are anxious about newcomer integration. The number of Canadians who agree with the sentiment "too many immigrants do not adopt Canadian values" was in gentle decline from 1993 to 2005 (from 72% to 58%) until it rose to 65% in 2006 (Adams 28), and now sits at 66% in 2010 (Focus Canada 2010). This increase in anxiety about integration is troubling, and though Canadians continue to have favourable opinions about immigration generally, support for both immigration and multiculturalism has softened slightly in the last four years. Initiatives like the Multicultural Program's Inter-Action Funding project, which has made inter-faith exchanges and understanding a priority, is a good measure and a good sign that multiculturalism continues to evolve in Canada. However, our success relative to other countries cannot become satisfaction, complacency, or self-congratulation. As part of public consciousness and as a concern of federal policy, persistent discrimination and the economic outcomes of both newcomers and particular visible minority groups must be at the forefront of discussions about multiculturalism's challenges and successes.

In terms of thinking about how these issues affect the concept of home, I am drawn again to my study of Dionne Brand. Home is usually presented as fixed, rooted, and stable, but given the slipperiness of the term and its many simultaneous meanings, home is actually a fluid concept. Brand says that home as fixed and stable is too limiting. It causes alienation and disconnection. What she calls for instead is the need to become "more comfortable with the discomfort" – to step outside of comfort zones. She wants to think of home as process, as space negotiated through diverse associations. Multiculturalism in Canada means that Canadian identity is always in process; it's an identity negotiated between newcomers, Canada's Aboriginal peoples, second-generation Canadians, visible minorities, third-generation + Canadians, etc. Brand really sees this vision of home playing out on the level of community. She celebrates what I have called "uneasy home-spaces" where uneasiness becomes a sign of the process of home – of a powerful but shifting community created by recognizing the individual agency of its members, a collaborative project.

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<sup>2</sup> Geert Wilders, a Dutch politician and leader of the Party for Freedom, was just speaking in Toronto and Ottawa on Monday and Tuesday. He's in Canada on a speaking tour warning about the dangers of Muslim newcomers and calling for Canada to halt all immigration from Middle Eastern countries. I'm happy to see he didn't receive much media attention or have large audiences at his (invitation-only) talks, but he's a good example of how the international hysteria has been imported to Canada.

\*\*\*Just a note about my Dionne Brand recommendations: She's most well-known for her poetry, but I really recommend two of her novels, *In Another Place, Not Here* and *What We All Long For*.

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