

The myth of the multicultural city: Learning to live together without coming to blows

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary accounts of cultural conflict fixate on the material causes of global disparities, but overlook how culture originates and functions in lived places. Given that cultural conflicts play out increasingly not on international battlefields, but in the contested terrain of cities, there is an urgent need for analyses of conflict that take both culture and place into account. This paper explores how the problematics of identity and difference play out in Toronto, Canada, a diverse city where immigration has made unlikely neighbors of diasporas, reflecting the dynamics of three centuries of cultural conflict. Literary representations of culture, identity, racism and difference illuminate the importance of communicating across culture and underscore the paper's central argument that narrative itself can become a way of negotiating cultural conflict if it helps people put cultural difference on the table without coming to blows. Finally, this paper argues that tolerance, and such multiculturalism as tolerance makes possible, is vital to mitigating not only crises of identity in local places, but also cultural ruptures and clashes in the global context.

Introduction

Accounts of contemporary culture are rife with narratives of conflict and rupture. Such accounts return repeatedly to the causes and consequences of globalization, the troubled intersection of capital and class, the complex legacies of colonialism, analyses of the politics of left and right, and explanations of the parallel ascendancies of theocratic and secular regimes in the East and West. Although many of these accounts have as their ostensible subject the character and expression of culture, in emphasizing the global scale of conflict, they tend to overlook how culture originates and functions in lived places. Given that local places—particularly cities—have not only become the dominant population centers, but are also where cultural conflicts are increasingly played out, there is an urgent need for analyses of conflict that take both culture and place into account.

Although the “spatial turn” in the social sciences has produced groundbreaking analyses of place that have arguably transformed whole fields of inquiry and have certainly expanded their scope, spatial analyses have remained focused largely on materialistic accounts of culture. Saskia Sassen’s (2006, 2009) seminal work on global cities, for example, is grounded firmly in political economy, while Henri Lefebvre (1991) and David Harvey’s (1989, 2009) analyses of social space, are closely informed by Marx’s historical materialism. Spatial scholars who seek to transcend the material—perhaps chief among them the influential postmodern geographer Edward Soja (1996) and predominant postcolonial theorists Edward Said (1978, 1993) and Homi Bhabha (1994)—are criticized (in the case of Soja and Bhabha) for the ephemeral substance of their claims about cultural hybridity or (in the case of Said) for misgauging the extent and nature of rupture between cultures. While it seems likely that Soja and Bhabha come the closest among spatial theorists to engaging meaningfully with the problematics of identity and difference within and between cultures, there remains a need to account for the ways culture is developed and negotiated in the everyday spaces where people live and interact in convivial or uneasy peace.

This paper deploys an idealist alternative, demonstrating that cultural reasons—not merely material causes—clarify how cultural identity originates and transforms. Once culture is understood as originating among shared meanings and truths most resistant to contrary experience and counter to facts, cultural crises can be identified as arising from fundamental contradictions in meaning. The role of tolerance, and such multiculturalism as tolerance makes possible, is clarified as vital to mitigating not only culture crises in particular, but also cultural ruptures and clashes in general.

The paper investigates these matters in an unusual way. Rather than focusing on any of the world’s current centers of cultural conflict, the paper draws its examples primarily from Toronto, a North American city of some five million people located along Canada’s long and largely peaceful border with the United States. With a population drawn from all over the world—the most recent census figures suggest that nearly half of Toronto’s population is foreign-born—Toronto is aptly described as a microcosm of global cultural forces. Contemporary immigration has made unlikely neighbors of Croatians, Serbs, Tamils, Sinhalese, Tutsis, Hutus, Sikhs, Hindus, Turks, Armenians, Muslims, Jews and representatives of manifold other diasporas reflecting the dynamics of more than three centuries of cultural conflict. The polyglot profile of the city’s population has given rise to a quasi-mythological claim that Toronto is the “most multicultural” city in the world. Indeed, the myth of the multicultural city has become such a crucial part of Toronto’s cultural identity that it bears examination.

An examination of literary representations, indicative of how Toronto’s cultural conversation is enriched by the telling of stories, shows that even apparently inconsistent cultural meanings can be tolerated and even embraced. Narrative itself can become a way of negotiating cultural conflict if it helps people put cultural difference on the table without coming to blows.

The myth of the multicultural city: Literary representations of identity and difference in Toronto, Canada

Among Torontonians, there is a widely held but inaccurate belief that the United Nations has formally declared Toronto to be the most multicultural city in the world. It is a statement repeated in newspaper accounts, government reports, mayoral speeches and even the city's promotional literature. Geographer Michael Doucet (2001) has investigated this claim at length and found no substantive basis for what he calls Toronto's most prominent urban legend. Nonetheless, the myth of the multicultural city has penetrated deeply into popular consciousness, perhaps in part because—as Doucet is careful to point out—Toronto is by any measure one of the world's most multiculturally diverse cities.

Doucet attributes the persistence of this myth to Toronto's desire to achieve "world class" standing in the eyes of the international community. While there is undoubtedly validity to this diagnosis, the story is far more complex than Doucet acknowledges: in truth the impetus driving Toronto's multicultural myth comes not from external forces but internal ones. Literary scholar Germaine Warkentin (2005) and poet Gwendolyn MacEwen (1985) have both described Toronto as a culturally amnesic city desperately seeking its own memory, but perhaps it is more accurate to say that Toronto is a city in search of its own creation myth.

Almost all cultures have creation myths, narratives recounting the story of their coming into being. Richly metaphorical, creation myths reflect a culture's efforts to make sense of its origins, express its principles, resolve internal tensions and establish shared identity. Creation myths are associated most commonly with traditional cultures, but even a city might have its own creation myth. In Toronto, a city whose inhabitants lack access to the common history and shared traditions that give rise to identity in so many other places—a city perched, perhaps perennially, at the verge of becoming—the myth of the multicultural city seems to have special resonance. Like other creation myths, the myth of the multicultural city is rife with tensions that arise from our efforts to speak the city into being. But it is only through principled engagement with these tensions—over cultural identity, difference and the limits of tolerance—that we learn how to live together, or determine whether we can do so at all.

In *The Global Soul*, a popular book tracing the ascent of transnational multiculturalism, essayist Pico Iyer calls Toronto "the city as anthology" (2000:120). The Toronto Iyer encounters is dizzying in its diversity. Describing himself as "spinning through cultures" while visiting the city to read at the International Festival of Authors, Iyer samples "Indian Pakistani-style Chinese food," wanders into a feminist service at a Korean Protestant church and visits a Scarborough high school where the students speak 76 different languages. Significantly, Iyer connects the success of what he calls Toronto's "multicultural experiment" to the city's literary diversity. Regardless of the focus of their work—

Rohinton Mistry's remembered Bombay, the "double foreignness" of Nino Ricci's Italian immigrants, the cultural topography layered in Anne Michaels' ravines—something unique about Toronto has brought so many writers together, and Iyer struggles to discover what it is.

Iyer is not the only writer to grapple with the characterization of Toronto's cultural diversity. In *Playing House*, novelist Patricia Pearson describes Toronto as "a city filled with accidental citizens." She adds,

They come from everywhere, from Argentina, Nigeria, Russia, Pakistan, but rarely because they have an explicit vision of the place; they aren't drawn by mythic images of riches and glamor like the immigrants arriving at the airports and harbors of New York. They are exiles, for the most part, who have thrown darts at a map of the world. Arriving, astonished by the cold, bewildered by hockey and our Nordic reserve, they nonetheless build their cities within our city: Chinatown, Little India, Portugal Town. Our city becomes a new city surprised by itself, doubletaking at the profusion of culture: Brazilian dance clubs, Indian cricket matches, Polish delis, Chinese newspapers, Ecuadorian snack stands, somber Italian Easter parades (Pearson, 2003:43–44).

Less concerned with points of origin and more with the multiplying effects of diversity in Toronto, in *What We All Long For*, novelist Dionne Brand produces an even longer list of Toronto's cultural communities, arrayed in permutations unfolding seemingly endlessly across the page:

In this city there are Bulgarian mechanics, there are Eritrean accountants, Colombian cafe owners, Latvian book publishers, Welsh roofers, Afghani dancers, Iranian mathematicians, Tamil cooks in Thai restaurants, Calabrese boys with Jamaican accents, Fushen deejays, Filipina-Saudi beauticians; Russian doctors changing tires, there are Romanian bill collectors, Cape Croker fishmongers, Japanese grocery clerks, French gas meter readers, German bakers, Haitian and Bengali taxi drivers with Irish dispatchers (Brand, 2005:5).

In contrast to Brand's ebullient inventory of cultural hybridity, novelist Stephen Marche suggests in *Raymond and Hannah* that identity in Toronto is a fleeting thing, rising and vanishing like ships adrift on an obliterating sea:

In Toronto, nothing stays for long. There is space enough here to fit us all in. No one remembers. A city for the fish who slipped through the parts of the net that are broken. The most anyone says in Toronto is, "Look, here were Native, then English, then Jewish, Italian, Portuguese, Vietnamese,

and other nations will take their place in a few generations.” The most anyone says is, “Look at the Muslims praying in the rush of Kennedy subway station.” “Look, we will lose even the idea of mother tongue or nation” (Marche, 2005:25).

In Marche’s Toronto, multiculturalism erases difference; he concludes,

There is a dream of interpenetration, and a dream of a city that war never visits, ...we are pigeons, multicolored, rustling against each other in all the public places, and the twenty-first century belongs to the color smudge (2005:205).

Pearson, Brand and Marche list Toronto’s accumulated cultures as if the act of doing so will help clarify what their collected presence means. The problem with such inventories is that culture cannot be made meaningful by cataloguing its component parts: even an anthology requires thematic coherence, just as a crossroads needs signposts to guide travelers on their way. Like promotional literature depicting Toronto as “the world within a city” and tourist brochures inviting visitors to “expect the world,” such characterizations of diversity seem inviting but are ultimately empty because they reduce the city to a collage of the glossy but ephemeral detritus of culture, like the scattering of sequins after a parade has passed.

Even with a calendar crammed with cultural festivals, the celebrated intersection of so many diverse communities in Toronto does not mean that each group enjoys equal opportunities in the multicultural city. In *Your Secrets Sleep With Me*, novelist Darren O’Donnell writes about the persistence of racial divisions in multicultural Toronto:

Some say that the only thing race is good for is to divide the population into work categories. Those who wash the dishes will be Sri Lankan, those who drive the cabs will be African, those who run the banks will be European, those who watch the kids will be Filipino, those who mind the store will be Korean and those upon whose bodies the good life is modeled will be, more and more, a hybridization of all of the above—on TV, on billboards, in magazines (O’Donnell, 2004:108).

For O’Donnell, the problem is that market-oriented multiculturalism serves up culture for consumption while concealing the racial divisions that persist among those who do the producing. He adds,

It would be a mistake to believe that these beautifully mixed people represent a race-free future—that people will stop their fixation on

difference and settle down to enjoying similarities. It's just a smokescreen.
Part of a dazzling performance (2004:108).

Cultural theorist Stanley Fish warns us to beware of what he calls "boutique multiculturalism," a perspective he characterizes as "the multiculturalism of ethnic restaurants, weekend festivals, and high profile flirtations with the other," a multiculturalism characterized by a "superficial and cosmetic" commitment to diversity (Fish, 1997:378). In Fish's view, celebrations of diversity that reduce culture to cooking, costume and traditional customs are in fact evasions of difference, amounting to a multiculturalism that suppresses areas of rupture in order to maintain the hollow claim that we are essentially all the same underneath. Ultimately, he writes, when confronted with real differences like racism, conflicting religious beliefs or the local consequences of global conflicts, the dominant culture cannot hope to bridge or even acknowledge them because it treats social problems as if they can be resolved by dancing together in the streets. But what happens after the bedraggled costumes are put away in the evening after the parade? How do we speak to our neighbors the next day and the day after that?

In Toronto, criticism of the propensity to fixate on superficial expressions of multiculturalism while suppressing or shying away from cultural difference finds voice in the city's literature. Often it appears in the guise of satire, a subversive literary device Northrop Frye (1957) refers to as "militant irony" because of its capacity to challenge oppressive but unspoken social conventions. In *Any Known Blood*, Lawrence Hill's sweeping novel exploring inheritance and identity, the mixed-race son of a black father and a white mother allows himself to be mistaken variously as French, Moroccan, Peruvian, American, Jamaican, as well as part Sikh, Jewish, Cree and Zulu, by Torontonians eager to criticize or capitalize upon the city's ethnic diversity. Ultimately, when applying for a government job as a speechwriter, he passes himself off as Algerian "in order to test my theory that nobody would challenge my claim to any racial identity" (Hill, 1997:2). Nobody does, even when he is exposed as the son of a prominent black doctor and human rights activist and fired, not for misrepresenting his background but for the more defensible disciplinary offense of doctoring a speech delivered by a hapless Minister duped into objecting to his own government's plan to eliminate human rights legislation in Ontario.

But satire can go only so far. Sharper words convey more clearly the persistence of the kind of bigotry that propelled poet Earle Birney (1969), in "Anglosaxon Street," to write of 1940s Toronto that

Here is a ghetto
O with care denuded
No coonsmell rankles
Attar of carexhaust

gotten for goyim
of nigger and kike
reeks only cellarrot
catcorpse and cookinggrease

Although published nearly half a century later, remarkably similar cadences characterize Krisantha Sri Bhaggiyadatta's Toronto poem, "Let's have some race talk" (1981:48):

Let's have some race talk
Some pakiniggerchink talk
Let's have some race talk
Some white talk some joke talk
Let's have some lynchdeportbash talk.

Birney and Bhaggiyadatta's emphatic words invoke conversations that the discourse of multiculturalism tends to gloss over—in this case racist epithets passed off as humor camouflaging the violent consequences of failing to fit into the prescribed cultural categories even in a city whose official motto is "Diversity Our Strength."

In M.G. Vassanji's novel, *No New Land*, a South Asian immigrant waiting on the subway platform at College Station in 1970s Toronto watches in stunned silence as a gang descends on a friend its members have targeted for racist assault:

Nanji began an instinctive step towards his compatriot, but then realized he would draw attention and stopped. At that moment a shiver ran down his spine. The three louts had come up behind Esmail and began their abuse. "Paki!" one of them shouted joyfully. Esmail turned toward them, looking frightened. "What do you have there, Paki? Hey, hey? Paki-paki-paki" (Vassanji, 1991:95–96).

Surrounded by silent, shuffling commuters, they punch Esmail and push him onto the tracks before running, unchallenged, out of the station. Nanji emerges from the incident physically unscathed but stunned, not so much by the assault itself but for his silent complicity in it:

The whole brutal incident was shocking, the more so for being wanton and racial, directed at someone who could have been himself. In that very real sense, he too had been attacked. What ached now, and horribly, was the recollection of his own behavior during the attack. He had not moved an inch, not uttered a syllable, to defend the man (Vassanji, 1991:97).

Even though none of the other commuters speaks out against the attackers, Nanji blames only himself. Beneath their surface veneer of social civility, he already knows that their capacity for empathy is constrained by their unmovable perception of Esmail, and therefore also of Nanji himself, as impenetrably alien. Indeed, public indignation over the incident remains strangely muted, reflecting resignation rather than outright objection:

[T]he outrage expressed officially, although perhaps too piously, by police, newspapers, and ordinary citizens decided once and for all that the line had been overstepped, that this was beyond tolerable limits. Toronto the Good would not have it. It brought home, to everybody, the fact that the immigrants were here to stay, they could not, would not, simply go away (Vassanji, 1991:107).

The subtext of this passage—that racism remains tolerable in Toronto the Good provided it does not step beyond seemly limits—reflects a far more common response to cultural difference, a reaction Pico Iyer refers to as “racism with a smile on its face.” Beneath benevolent expressions of cultural openness in Toronto, literary descriptions, whether of violent attacks or more subtle expressions of exclusion, reveal a city that remains sharply divided along racial lines.

At the same time, it is an error to assume that ambivalence and distrust flow only in one direction. If responses to cultural difference in Toronto range from enthusiastic overtures to xenophobic brutality, newcomers’ expectations are tempered with apprehension and, occasionally, antipathy. In Rabindranath Maharaj’s (1997) novel, *Homer in Flight*, for example, the protagonist’s plan to emigrate from his comfortable South Asian community in Trinidad to an uncertain future in Toronto meets with stiff opposition from family members who warn him of the perils awaiting him in Canada. As his determination mounts and the date of his emigration grows nearer, their warnings grow increasingly dire, and Homer spends his final months in Trinidad enduring his mother

recounting horror stories about Trinidadians who left good jobs in the island only to end up on welfare, imprisoned in boxy little apartments, eating cat food and shivering with ague, consumption, pneumonia and catarrh. The severity of these diseases increased proportionately with Homer’s intractability. AIDS, rabies, flesh-eating bacteria, mad cow disease and a host of other afflictions were summoned to decorate her predictions (Maharaj, 1997:8).

Two years after landing in Toronto, Homer comes to see his emigration as the product of a peculiar insanity shared with other Trinidadians whose motives he assesses in a moment of depressing clarity:

They did not leave their little island because of wars or famine or ethnic cleansing but because of the constant desire for romance and adventure. A ritual of escape, normally dramatized into threats and promises to leave the island, but sometimes, during moments of recklessness, actually planned and executed, so that months later, when the madness passes, the poor shivering Trinidadian finds himself trapped in a dark, cockroach-infested

apartment, and then the adventure fumbles to a self-recriminatory conclusion (Maharaj, 1997:293).

Homer's flight—motivated by his eagerness to escape the crushing weight of family obligation and the anarchy he senses lurking at the edge of everyday life in Trinidad—runs aground in Toronto, a city where he finds himself perpetually in transit, seeking something—a sense of solidity, a source of identity, security, belonging—that he can hardly articulate and can never quite seem to achieve. He despairs that he will end up like his friend Grants, “forever trapped between two worlds, afraid to call either home, dancing in the dark” (Maharaj, 1997:298).

Homer's sense of liminality is echoed in Vassanji's *No New Land*, a novel documenting not only racially motivated hostility like the subway attack against Nanji, but also the more prosaic difficulties of existing between cultures. Vassanji's protagonist, the patriarch of a family of Shamsi Muslims who fled Tanzania following political upheaval in the 1970s, worries that life in Toronto has eroded the foundations of his family and his faith. In the years since their arrival, the Lalani family has established itself in Toronto—Nurdin's wife joining the extended network of Dar ex-patriots populating their Don Mills apartment building, his teenaged children adopting the casual dress and contemporary idiom of their peers—but Nurdin finds himself feeling isolated and unmoored.

“When does a man begin to rot?” Nurdin asks himself, evaluating his moral decline since arriving in Toronto. Of all his transgressions—drinking beer, watching erotic films, unaccompanied visits with an unmarried female acquaintance—the one that disturbs Nurdin most greatly is having eaten a sausage pressed upon him by a co-worker, a lapsed vegetarian from Guyana who comments, “Forget pork, man. I was not supposed to eat meat. Even egg. I'm supposed to think you are dirty. You think they are dirty. Who is right? Superstitions, all” (Vassanji, 1991:127). For Nurdin, however, eating the sausage not only violates his Muslim faith and the edict against consuming pork; it also reflects the subsuming of his sense of identity within what he sees as the yawning morass of Canadian culture:

The pig, they said, was the most beastly of beasts. It ate garbage and feces, even its babies, it copulated freely, was incestuous. Wallowed in muck. Eat pig and become a beast. Slowly the bestial traits—cruelty and promiscuity, in one word, godlessness—overcame you. And you became, morally, like them. The Canadians (Vassanji, 1991:127).

Nurdin traces his subsequent difficulties—culminating in his arrest for an alleged sexual assault against a patient at the hospital where he works as an orderly—to this initial transgression, an act he senses has changed him irrevocably, however invisibly. Even though the charges are quickly withdrawn, the incident a misunderstanding, the experience reinforces Nurdin's sense of dissolution and drift. His inability to reconcile the old values with the new context raises the unhappy

possibility that the differences are simply irreconcilable, the cultural gulf too great to be bridged.

Irreconcilable differences manifest more explosively in V.V. Ganeshanathan's *Love Marriage*, a novel tracing the consequences of Sri Lanka's long-running civil war upon a family living in contemporary Toronto. The daughter of a notorious member of the Liberation Tigers scheduled to be married to the son of a prominent Tamil businessman finds that violence has followed her across land and sea. While her extended family gathers for dinner at their Scarborough home the night before the ceremony, assailants—Tamils themselves, staking out territory in the new country—douse the wedding venue with gasoline and set it on fire. Ganeshanathan's narrator describes how strikingly the cordial rituals of the meal parallel the meticulous execution of the firebombing:

As my mother is serving out the rice, a Tamil man whose interests in Toronto rival Suthan's is walking up to the locked doors of the Tamil community center with bolt cutters. ... As my father asks for another helping of coconut sambol, the man is playing a flashlight across the walls of the main room, its decorations, its map of Sri Lanka, its Hindu gods. He has donned leather gloves, his expression unreadable. He could be doing this in another country entirely. He pours gasoline all over the rugs, and all over the wooden frame of the mānavarai, the wedding altar Suthan has built for Janani, and which tomorrow would have been adorned with flowers (Ganeshanathan, 2008:247).

As the final sip of tea is swallowed and the family prepares for bed, their peace is shattered by the very conflict they have crossed continents to escape:

Miles away, in a place empty of people, the stranger hands two flaming bottles to the men behind him. They roll their windows down, and the man in the driver's seat counts to three. Like twinned shooting stars, the bottles spiral through the air. Two, and then another two, the first pair shattering the hall's front windows. ... a spark paints a stripe down a trail of gasoline, to another, to another, until a web of light tightens like a fist around the structure in which Janani was to be Married.

We are in a different country, a different time.
But the building explodes.
It explodes.
It explodes (Ganeshanathan, 2008:249).

In a city of immigrants whose arrivals, now as always, trace entire genealogies of conflict, perhaps the very diversity upon which Toronto bases its identity becomes

an intractable difficulty, although as Ganeshanathan's narrator observes tightly, "this is not a noble fight. It has nothing to do with the people dying in another country. It has to do with territory here, territory now, in this Western city" (Ganeshanathan, 2008:250).

Where do these disparate renderings of the multicultural city leave us? How do we navigate between naive optimism, expressed in municipal slogans and street festivals celebrating Toronto's cultural diversity, and violent expressions of enmity motivated by local or global conflict? Do we shrug and simply label them as end points along an inevitable continuum of positive or unpleasant encounters with difference in an otherwise successfully multicultural city? Or must we conclude that multiculturalism has failed both as policy and as social practice? The remainder of this paper takes up these questions.

Dealing with difference without coming to blows: The role of tolerance

Negotiating cultural difference without coming to blows presents a foremost challenge wherever cultures converge. But when considering the character and consequences of cultural conflict, we must ask: Do merely cultural differences prove materially significant to human conflict? Are there real limits to the cultural meanings and truths people can tolerate and embrace? Or might any and all cultural meanings, regardless how apparently inconsistent and glaringly contradictory, become reconciled? No such impossible luck. From cultural self-segregation to violent fragmentation to the infinite hostilities between neighboring cultures, the limits of tolerance loom endlessly. And the more fundamental our conflicts become, the more mysterious, irrational and incoherent we deem them to be.

At every crossroad where we become divided by difference, where we confront what cultural theorists have come to theorize as the Other, we also fail understanding or even imagining what is divided and what is dividing. When there are visible differences, we cannot keep from supposing our separations must be across the differences most visible to us. When our differences are not visibly obvious, we infer that separation and struggle must nevertheless be rooted in material divisions across tangible categories. Class, race, gender, history, geography—and a swelling host of ever-more fine-grained divisions of difference. But what we keep failing to even imagine, and the reason we cannot come to grips with why we keep coming to blows, is how our differences are rooted in the breakdown of meaning itself.

We fail to appreciate the meaning of difference most especially when it comes to fundamental differences in cultural meanings. This is by no means to resurrect epistemically naive views that meaning, understanding and imagination can only be functions of lived experience, that therefore there can be no real understanding across insurmountable gaps in our experience of class, race or gender, and that

lacking real understanding in events of dispute allows no other options but eventually coming to blows. Such views must appear naive when realizing that while the categories of *meaning*, *understanding* and *imagination* cannot be considered entirely outside all reference to experience, neither can they be thought wholly *restricted by* and *limited to* our prior experience. It is far too late in the day to keep forgetting how particularly and categorically in meaning, understanding and imagining we go beyond the information given—and past every experience already had.

Rather, the implication drawn here is that difference may transcend every experience to become contradiction in meaning itself. This is how difference can grow most insurmountable. When fundamental meanings become too glaringly inconsistent, conflict becomes unavoidable despite any possible material conciliation. From criminality to cultural fragmentation to the scorched-earth between cultures, violent conflict can remain the only meaningful expression when fundamental meanings become too contradictory, too glaringly inconsistent to conceivably reconcile.

To better appreciate fundamental cultural meanings in their vital and potentially devastating attributes requires distinguishing them as distinct truths within a separate domain—an entirely discrete domain ranging far from the more material scientific meanings and truths to which we have grown so accustomed during the past several hundred years.¹ For while more scientific stories benefit best when they can be refuted by experience—with least further qualification—the precise opposite becomes the case when fundamental cultural narratives are concerned.

Our fundamental cultural meanings and truths cannot depend on confirmation. Nor can they wait on refutation from one day to the next. They cannot become provisional like scientific truths. They cannot be maintained theoretically—or understood speculatively. They cannot be considered conditional or contingent on material circumstance. For whether explicitly expressed or tacitly entailing our ways of life and forms of living, they define our identities, what we stand for, who we are as peoples. Necessary as god-given truths, fundamental values or self-evident first principles, the meanings and truths most central to the very possibility of complex human society must keep binding despite every vagary of fortune and circumstance. They must hold through each absurdity of human experience. Only thus, entrenched in shared meanings, can pivotal cultural truths continually carve common sense from counter-productive non-sense. Only thereby, construed as inter-subjectively shared meanings often contrary to facts, can cultural truths provide the cohesion upon which common identity depends in numbers too large to possibly rely on shared experience.

It is no matter of degrees. The contrast is categorical. As scientific meanings must be open to testing by experience, just so fundamental cultural meanings must resist becoming overwhelmed by experience. However they might otherwise evolve—an avid question²—fundamental cultural meanings keep resisting refutation by experience. When regimented as cultural principles, they define who we are and

who we are not in relation to others. They often persist tacitly, covertly—perhaps alarming us when uncovered. They can entail worlds of invisible yet profoundly meaningful, real, definitive differences from others—differences with underlying contradicting cultural principles that can prove impossibly resistant to every material conciliation.³

Yet, when difference is such that meaning itself fails, we keep failing to appreciate the meaning of difference. While tremendously positive, valuable work emerges from exploring every variety of material difference, not only points, but entire spectra of difference in fundamental meanings remain undetected. These are precisely the most meaningful differences least amenable to material conciliation.

For only one instance, in calling for a more genuine, deliberative democracy, sociologist Iris Young

asks us to envision democratic processes as highly antagonistic encounters between citizens who occupy different locations—at times, they even occupy diametrically opposed positions—and who nevertheless can be persuaded to set aside their self-regarding interests to open themselves to communicative engagement (quoted in Smith, 2008:137).

But envisioning citizens being persuaded to deliberate and choose their futures together becomes impossible if the positions they occupy are “diametrically opposed” in terms of fundamental cultural meanings. It grows far too late for meaningful “communicative engagement” when positions become so opposed and divided in meaning, when cultural principles are arrayed in stark and glaring contradiction. Once such glaring fundamental contradicting ensues, we envision only inimical, different others—not citizens together. If they cannot manage separating well enough to deliberate and choose their independent futures apart, then they will certainly seek to overwhelm each others’ cultural self-narratives by force. Fundamental contradictions not only divide their identities and self-narratives, but logically forbid coherence to meaningful communicative engagement. Nothing but force remains meaningful after meaning fails.

Fortunately, not everyone has disregarded how meaning can fail and what consequences can ensue when it does. However arguably flawed, Edward Said’s (1993) prolific analyses (not just in *Orientalism*) of bias in cultural narratives have broken much ground and cannot be overlooked. Unfortunately, Said’s focus did not sufficiently stray from how biased Western narratives of cultural others were. The existence and extent of fundamental contradictions in cultural self-narratives themselves, inside and outside the West, were nowhere near sufficiently addressed.

Of course negligent falsehood, absurdity and bias in narratives about cultural others are just terrible. When such become willful, they constitute attacks of propaganda—expressing hatred and swelling possibilities of outright hostilities. Yet, unless willful, even the most negligent, worst bias does not quite qualify as outright hostility or an attack of propaganda. Not so when respective cultural self-narratives

fundamentally contradict, when cultural principles who we must and must not be are arrayed in stark and glaring contradiction. Because once contradictions athwart respective identities are exposed as fundamental, possibilities of conflict swell infinitely towards eventual actuality. Every possibility of more meaningful communicative engagement is lost after meaning itself fails.

Thus, despite all criticism for misgauging the extent and nature of rupture between cultures, Said did not go too far: he fell short. Terrible as not-*quite* propaganda in our narratives of cultural others is, fundamental contradictions among our cultural self-narratives are infinitely worst. Only when cultural principles concerning who we must and must not be fundamentally contradict does conflict become most inevitable.

But if there cannot be enough tolerance to accommodate every possible cultural meaning and truth, what can possibly be done if fundamental contradictions do become exposed between our cultural principles? What do we do when meanings fail, closing our options to meaningfully deliberate and choose futures together? What are we to then do if all concerned keep mingling and dwelling among each other—as in multicultural Toronto, Canada—having not even begun self-segregating to meaningfully deliberate choosing their separate, independent futures safely apart?

Literary theorist Stanley Fish has put forward some suggestive terminology—if not to help, then at least to help clarify our options against the divisions entailed by cultural rupture. Rejecting programmatic approaches to multiculturalism that produce conceptual paralysis or civic hypocrisy, he suggests instead that we engage in “inspired adhocery” in the interests of achieving a successful—or at least more honest—multiculturalism rooted in improvisation across the uneven landscape of cultural diversity. Averring that “multiculturalism will not be one thing, but many things,” Fish writes,

We may never be able to reconcile the claims of difference and community in a satisfactory formula, but we may be able to figure out a way for *these* differences to occupy the civic and political space of *this* community without coming to blows (Fish, 1997:385).

In short, Fish suggests abandoning the “ism” in multiculturalism, calling instead for open dialogue about what it means to communicate across culture and asking us to consider whether such a thing is even possible. In this respect Fish has much in common with prominent postcolonial theorist Paul Gilroy, who argues in *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2005) that an organic, emergent “multiculture” manages to sustain itself wholly independently of state policies designed to encourage or contain expressions of cultural difference. Both Fish and Gilroy reject naive visions as well as legalistic prescriptions about what the multicultural city should look like and how it should work. While they do not make explicit where space for difference might be made, if courts, committees and council chambers must be ruled out by

their own inability to seize the slippery nuances of culture, then perhaps we may turn to spaces of discourse where meaning is by its very nature partial, improvisational and subject to revision. These are the spaces of the imagination—film, art and especially literature—where the great myths of each era are actively and constantly dismantled and reinvented. In Toronto in particular, it is in our literature where the myth of the multicultural city receives its critical and creative attention.

At one extreme, we could embrace and emulate the *boutique multiculturalist*, who voraciously, conspicuously consumes whatever individuals from different cultures cook, play, sell and materially produce and never once doubts that's what being multicultural is about. For what more could there be to culture beyond different modes of material productions and consumptions? At the other extreme, we could emulate the *strong multiculturalist*, who we observe attempting to adopt manners, language, customs, deportment, narratives and beliefs from those of different cultures, indeed, just about anything and everything, so long as it is from cultures other than one's own, throughout professing deepest respect and admiration for all cultures, regardless of relative banalities such as right or wrong. Everything and anything at all becomes admirable just so long as it is cultural. There is unconditional, indiscriminate respect for all cultures—other than one's own.

Of course, Fish is correct. We should abandon the "isms" in multiculturalism—and the "ists" who practice them. Yet, what makes Fish's extremes of boutique and strong multiculturalism so suggestive is the dilemma to which they force all our notions of tolerance. For should we adopt cultural consumptions only as subject to our most banal convenience, then we fail to tolerate any real cultural difference inconvenient to us. On the other hand, should we indiscriminately adopt every cultural difference we can stumble across, then, in a basic way, we reject our own cultures and become intolerant of ourselves.

What makes it a dilemma? Why must it be one or the other? Because in events of cultures rupturing over fundamental contradictions, we can't have both. Not after meaning fails. Not without coming to blows. Either we cease tolerating cultural principles contradicting our own, or we cease tolerating our own cultural principles contradicting any that are different. Either way, so much for tolerance and multiculturalism.

Fish did not, however, take his own dilemma too hard. Nor should we. The dichotomy between boutique and strong multiculturalists collapses in practice. Here in tolerant, multicultural Toronto the Good, we see that dichotomy collapsing anywhere at anytime.

We cannot help seeing how steeped in ignorance of cultural difference the blithe consumption of boutique multiculturalists can be. When we look but slightly closer, we see strong multiculturalists identically steeped in cultural ignorance. But with fewest exceptions, despite how strong multiculturalists advocate their respects, they never seem to get past stumbling across cultural differences to actually embracing and adopting them. And why should they? Once any difference becomes

fully adopted, it ceases to be difference. It becomes one's actual cultural identity. Hence, the cachet of embracing difference is lost. That's why the value of strong multiculturalism is in advocating and continually stumbling across—not in genuinely embracing and fully adopting. Like their boutique relatives, strong multiculturalists are there to be seen, to be viewed as more culturally sophisticated. However accidental their tourism might be, it is not entirely honest.

It ought to be clear by now, by this day and age, that there are necessarily real limits to tolerance, that some limits to the cultural meanings and truths people can tolerate and embrace are inexorable. This is precisely not because the limits of tolerance are written in stone, but when they are written in logic. Embracing fundamental contradictions in place of cultural principles is not tolerance. It is fundamental incoherence.

Does this mean we ought to abandon tolerance in favor of more enlightened multiculturalism? Of course not. Nowhere more so than in Toronto, Canada, tolerance has become our cultural principle, whereas multiculturalism is the policy dictated and informed by our principled tolerance. The latter hinges from the former entirely too absolutely to replace it. If tolerance is an ideal and perhaps also an ideology, then multiculturalism is our manner of practicing it. And while no amount of practice can make ideal perfection, honest practice does perfect over time—if, that is, we can be so honest as to heed what our practice reveals about our meanings, truths, ideals and ideologies, what is revealed in our most fundamental stories—whether about the world or our selves.

Nothing can teach so well about our ideals of tolerance as how we keep *failing* to deploy multiculturalism in practice. From boutique multiculturalism we can learn to give up notions that tolerance is but familiarity with material differences in production and consumption. From strong multiculturalism we can learn to give up notions that tolerance can embrace every conceivable difference—regardless of how fundamentally contradictory (such as the most raving *intolerance*, for example).

But if we discard both boutique and strong multiculturalism, does any kind of multiculturalism remain for us to practice? Of course there does. Any multiculturalism remains that is not naive in the ways boutique and strong multiculturalism are. We could call it informed multiculturalism. Or, much better yet—tolerance.

What would a truly tolerant multiculturalism look like? For one thing, it would acknowledge that difference is about much more than material accouterments of culture like cooking, costume and even socio-economic position. In part this requires an openness to the possibility that fundamental contradictions might exist between cultures that preclude their ever cohabiting peacefully in the same place. It does not mean that those contradictions do exist everywhere, but it does require us to give up the pretense that we can live happily together without ever discussing difference. Because in truth, acknowledging cultural difference and even cultural contradiction enriches rather than impoverishes our cultural conversation, even if in

the end some of those differences prove too fundamental or glaringly contradictory to reconcile.

This article began with the claim that culture does not emerge from shared experience but rather is rooted in shared ideals. It is time, now, to ask what tolerance can possibly mean in the multicultural city. In his challenging, controversial book, *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada*, novelist Neil Bissoondath argues that tolerance amounts to little more than “putting up” with difference, intimating that “the pose of tolerance...can very quickly metamorphose into virulent defensiveness, rejecting the different, alienating the new” (Bissoondath, 1994:103). Successful multiculturalism, he continues, requires a much stronger commitment to understanding: “Canada has long prided itself on being a tolerant society, but tolerance is clearly insufficient in the building of a cohesive society. A far greater goal to strive for would be an *accepting* society” (Bissoondath, 1994:191–192).

If Bissoondath rejects tolerance for being too narrow, Stanley Fish attacks tolerance for being too broad, observing that

the trouble with stipulating tolerance as your first principle is that you cannot possibly be faithful to it because sooner or later the culture whose core values you are tolerating will reveal itself to be intolerant at that same core; that is, the distinctiveness that marks it as unique and self-defining will resist the appeal of moderation or incorporation into a larger whole. Confronted with a demand that it surrender its viewpoint or enlarge it to include the practices of its natural enemies—other religions, other races, other genders, other classes—a beleaguered culture will fight back with everything from discriminatory legislation to violence (Fish, 1997:382–383).

In a commentary interrogating cultural controversies ranging from Afrocentric education to the Islamic *fatwā* against novelist Salman Rushdie, Fish argues that “in the end neither the boutique multiculturalist nor the strong multiculturalist is able to come to terms with difference” (1997:384).

Bissoondath and Fish aptly characterize the classic dilemma of tolerance: that “mere tolerance” begrudges difference while absolute tolerance courts absurdity by seeking to tolerate even intolerance. Other critics, among them feminist (e.g., Brown, 2006; Phillips, 2007), postcolonial (e.g., Gilroy, 2005; the influential work of Stuart Hall (see Meeks, 2007) and Marxist (Zizek, 2008)⁴ scholars, challenge conceptions of tolerance on the grounds that they privilege those who do the tolerating (narrated as white, male, Western Selves) over those who are only ever provisionally tolerated (described as minority, women, immigrant Others). In reality, however, divisions between the privileged and the oppressed cannot be so easily categorized. Indeed, given the extent of our intersubjectivity, the principle of tolerance seems to offer the only real hope that we can engage meaningfully with difference and communicate across cultures without coming to blows. Tolerance

does not always lead to acceptance, but at least it is honest about its strengths and shortcomings. Moreover, because it forces us to recognize one another's shared right to the city, tolerance may represent precisely the kind of "inspired adhocery" that Stanley Fish suggests is needed to make the multicultural city work.

How does a commitment to tolerance enable us to engage meaningfully with difference? First and most importantly, tolerance acknowledges the tensions that exist among cultural communities, particularly in a city like Toronto whose population reflects the dynamics of three centuries of global conflict. Tolerance acknowledges, further, that social power is distributed unevenly, and that individuals and minority cultures need to be protected from intolerance. Engaging meaningfully with difference forces us to realize, finally, that even tolerance has limits. Some of the limits of tolerance are easy to agree on: that civil liberties do not extend to hate speech or hateful acts, and that racially motivated violence is more than mere assault. But other areas are more challenging to negotiate, such as the proposed introduction of Sharia law or Aboriginal sentencing circles already established in some jurisdictions alongside the established courts. A commitment to tolerance signals our willingness to engage with these difficult questions as if culture—and cultural difference—actually matters to us in the multicultural city.

Tolerance, in short, is committed precisely to the kinds of negotiation across culture that rescue multiculturalism from empty utopianism and enable us to engage meaningfully with one another. While some of these negotiations are conducted in civil courts, human rights tribunals and legislative assemblies, the great bulk of our understandings arise in the unspoken conversations between people thrust together in the streets, subways, sidewalks, elevators, offices, parks and playgrounds of this city. Urgent, embodied and living, these conversations about culture filter into the city's literature and are transmitted into the soul of the city itself. If we are willing to listen, it is possible to discern at least four kinds of conversations about culture.

In the first of these conversations, writers respond actively to intolerance. Already in this essay we have encountered writers who bear witness to the divisive effects of intolerance and whose protagonists resist racism by exposing it to the withering language of satire, by challenging cultural stereotypes and—perhaps above all—by flatly rejecting victimhood. If further evidence is required to drive this last point home, perhaps the most striking additional example is found in Vassanji's *No New Land*, in which one of the protagonists, when asked casually by a white lover, "why do you Pakis come to this country," elects not to sublimate his rage or ignore the slur. Instead, he responds by turning his stream of urine upon her naked body and asserting, "this is what we Pakis are going to do to you" (Vassanji, 1991:105–106).

The second conversation is restorative, oriented toward reclaiming identity from the obliterating effects of racial prejudice, economic exclusion, political erasure and ethnic spectacles that reduce culture to cliché. In a city where cultural minorities strive for visibility, Toronto's Aboriginal inhabitants have been so thoroughly Othered they have nearly vanished from the cultural landscape. In *What*

We All Long for, Dionne Brand inventories the city's array of Italian, Vietnamese, Chinese, Ukrainian, Pakistani, Korean and African neighborhoods before making the startling observation that "[a]ll of them sit on Ojibway land, but hardly any of them know it or care because that genealogy is willfully untraceable except in the name of the city itself" (Brand, 2005:4). Toronto's Aboriginal writers confront a double erasure. Popular portrayals of drunk, homeless Indians panhandling outside the liquor store compete with the equally prevalent perception that "authentic" Natives do not belong in Toronto at all.

Many Aboriginals are invisible in cities because of a widely held assumption that being Native is inherently incompatible with being urban. In *Tkaronto*, a 2008 film exploring contemporary urban Aboriginal identity in Toronto, an Elder asks rhetorically, "What are we supposed to do? Leave our aboriginalness on the outskirts of town and pick it up on the way out again? Like it only exists out there?" "Out there" refers, of course, to the reservations now widely understood to be Native people's "natural" habitat. This perception persists despite the reality that more Aboriginals live in cities, including Toronto, than at any time in the past.

Toronto's Aboriginal writers respond to erasure in a variety of ways. In *Big Buck City* (1998), poet-playwright Daniel David Moses reclaims Native stereotypes through satire, converting slurs about "bush Indians" and "reservations" into jokes about prostitution and dinner plans. In the novel *Through Black Spruce*, Joseph Boyden (2008) populates Toronto with a network of Natives who all seem to know each other, congregating informally at the Native Canadian Center on Spadina, at The Meeting Place near the corner of Bathurst and Queen, or gathering to roast goose under the Gardiner Expressway. In Cherie Dimaline's *Red Rooms* (2007), a chambermaid weaves encounters with hotel guests and their left-behind items into vivid portraits of a downtown hotel's Aboriginal guests. In each of these works, the city's Native population is projected into the foreground: their lives, stories and communities dominate narratives of a city that has more than merely metaphorically "gone native."

At the same time, the Aboriginal protagonists of these works remain deeply ambivalent about a city they inhabit but are reluctant to call home. Like Boyden's Natives, congregating around a tarpaulin tepee they have erected under the Gardiner Expressway, or like Dimaline's Aboriginal hotel guests, they seem to seek out the city's liminal spaces by preference as much as necessity, their chosen transience a symbolic response to three centuries of cultural displacement. As one of Boyden's characters responds to another who objects to his panhandling: "Think of it as cheap rent for good land" (2008:72).

Ultimately, however, the city becomes a site for unmistakable acts of reclamation. In Dimaline's story, "Room 106," a famous Cree photographer who has traveled the world documenting Aboriginal life returns to Toronto and, finally realizing what has been missing from his work, takes a photograph of himself surrounded by images of his people pinned to the wall of this anonymous urban hotel room. This arresting self-portrait, entitled "Finding Home," achieves

international fame as a testament to identity lost and regained. Similarly, in Moses' play, *City of Shadows* (2000), the spirits of dead Aborigines inhabit a city filled with the broken bones of ancestors, a city inverted, as its ghosts, reduced to whisperings heard on the night wind, are revealed to be the white intruders who occupy the waking city but cannot lay claim to its soul. As Moses writes in the play's epigraph, quoting legendary Suquamish Chief Seattle, "All night when the streets of your cities and villages are silent and you think them deserted, they will throng with the returning hosts that once filled them and still love this beautiful land" (Moses, 2000:104).

In the third conversation, writers inscribe their cultural narratives into the city's literary landscape for the first time. One of the earliest of these voices is Henry Kreisel, whose 1948 novel, *The Rich Man*, describes the efforts of its narrator, a Jewish garment factory worker born in Austria, to reconcile the obligations of the Old World with the opportunities of the New. Subsequent generations of writers extend Toronto's cultural narrative to reflect the global diaspora and fulfill Dionne Brand's optimism that "the literature is still catching up with the city, with its new stories" (quoted in Tepper, 2005).

Perhaps most deeply evocative of the need for culturally resonant literature is Farzana Doctor's (2007) novel *Stealing Nasreen*, in which a lesbian psychologist's flirtation with her married Gujarati teacher leads both to question their cultural commitments. Born in Canada to Indian parents, Nasreen becomes an object of fascination to Mumbai-born Salma and her husband Shaffiq, a janitor at the hospital where Nasreen works. Discovering that they have formed an uncomfortable triangle, the three begin to renegotiate lives they have chosen but find increasingly confining. Nasreen reconciles with her recently widowed father, agrees to a joint visit to Mumbai and even contemplates buying a house with him, hoping these efforts will heal what she has come to recognize as their shared emotional homelessness. Shaffiq resolves to speak across the silence that has crept into his marriage, acknowledging what emigration has cost them and promising to help fulfill their shared aspirations. For her part, Salma finds herself gradually, perhaps grudgingly, coming to terms with her new life in Canada:

The new job, this job that Shaffiq finally found after two long years in Toronto, holds the promise of permanent life in Canada. Now they can stay, will stay, have everything they need to stay. A part of her has always hoped that Shaffiq's terrible night shift job and her boring dry cleaner work would lead them to the only possible, rational conclusion about their big adventure in Canada; it would be a failure and they would have to return home. She held on tightly to this belief, even while she kept busy decorating their apartment, settling her children into school, acquiring the necessary ID, and finding work. But now things are working out for them and they will stay. Now they will be successful immigrants (Doctor, 2007:217).

Despite her misgivings about coming to Canada, despite the struggles of their first two years in Toronto, Salma finds that the city has worn down her resistance. Buoyed by Shaffiq's new job and the renewed candor of their marriage, Salma begins to map out her own future in Canada, setting aside money for university tuition, anticipating teaching again, and looking forward to the day when she, too, can finally feel like she belongs in Toronto.

The fourth conversation, finally, seeks to communicate across difference, to identify common ground and explore what might be shared—however beautiful or terrible—in the multicultural city. In Brand's novel, *What We All Long For*, a young artist resolves to build a *lubaio*, a Chinese signpost, out of discarded railway ties and found lumber she has hauled to her Kensington Market apartment and to which she plans to affix items that represent the city's desires. After crafting the massive frame of the *lubaio*, Tuyen ventures forth into the city, asking people to tell her what they long for. Their longings are as varied as the city itself: "Reading, a whole year to read;" "To feel safer; safe, like when I was a child." A Somali taxi driver tells her he longs for "enough money to go home and marry four wives." At the same time, a Bengali woman asks Tuyen, "Why long for anything? Longing is suffering." And so Tuyen also begins to collect the city's hideous longings, the hidden desires of murderers and rapists, stories gleaned from inferred body language and newspaper articles. She collects material scraps of the city: lost photographs, bank receipts, shopping lists, pages of letters, and pins them all to the *lubaio*, where they sway suspended like prayer flags. As the installation takes shape, Tuyen is stunned to discover that recent photographs she has taken in Toronto contain images of her brother, lost as a child when her parents fled Vietnam, and whose absence has been the family's deepest sorrow and the source of its greatest longing.

Out of all these disparate fragments, out of all the shouted, whispered, unspoken, lost and forgotten stories she has collected, Tuyen constructs a monument to the multicultural city. The *lubaio* is an edifice to culture and a tangible representation of difference, but beyond all this, it gives voice to the city's greatest longing: a desire to speak and the parallel need to be heard. As Brand writes,

Yes, that was the beauty of this city, it's polyphonic, murmuring. This is what always filled Tuyen with hope, this is what she thought her art was about—the representation of that gathering of voices and longings that summed themselves up into a kind of language, yet indescribable (Brand, 2005:149).

Conclusion

Cultural theorist Roland Barthes refers to the city as "the place of our meeting with the other." He goes on to describe the city as "the privileged place where the other is

and where we ourselves are other, as the place where we play the other” (Barthes, 1986:96). Barthes uses the word “play” purposefully, invoking not only its pleasurable aspects, but also its subversive, revelatory, even transformative qualities. For Barthes, play is never empty, never inconsequential: it is, he suggests, the most vital of city-building activities. If the city is a poem, as Barthes reminds us, it is like Raymond Queneau’s *Cent Mille Milliards de Poèmes* (One Hundred Thousand Billion Poems), intricately crafted so that changing a single line creates an entirely new poem. By our very presence in the city—by inhabiting, building, navigating and narrating it—we appropriate and transform it, and are in turn appropriated and transformed ourselves. What emerges is not only the city (or the self) that we wish to project, but all the other cities and all the other selves—the disordered and displaced, as well as the beautiful and beloved—that exist alongside it. A living city, an open city—a successfully multicultural city—requires this discourse of play, a discourse that offers something the language of war cannot provide: the promise of communication, a shared wish for reconciliation, a reaching out, a bridge—and sometimes, a needed slap in the face.

When we “play the other” in the city, we begin to appreciate the overlapping nuances of cultural identity rather than reducing one another to catalogues of the familiar or foreign. This does not mean that we take difference any less seriously. Rather, if we treat the city—and the city’s literature—as prominent sites for the uneven negotiations across culture that define our era, we commit to principled engagement with difference. This requires us to give up certain of our conceits, perhaps chief among them the claim that cultural openness may be expressed meaningfully by ordering take-out Thai food to celebrate the Chinese New Year or swaying self-consciously to mas bands during the Caribana parade. It requires, too, the parallel abandonment of identity politics rooted in a view of ourselves primarily as victims of history, a perspective one of Rabindranath Maharaj’s protagonists characterizes as favored by “those who continually nourish their wounds, tear away the scabs and offer their bruises for inspection. Such an elaborate preparation for sympathy, yet offended when it was given” (Maharaj, 2002:161). It requires us to admit, finally, that we are uneasy with one another, and that there are things we do not, will not, or perhaps cannot understand about each other. Admitting our unease seems so difficult, so at odds with the ideals of the multicultural city, and yet it is necessary if we are to have any hope of fulfilling them.

In an era when terrorists crash hijacked airplanes into high rise towers, when suicide bombers march calmly onto crowded public buses and blow themselves up, and when ethnic minorities are attacked in the streets for wearing culturally distinct clothing, Toronto stands out as a city where it is possible, indeed necessary, to deal with our differences without coming to blows. In this city we are enthusiastic about shawarma. We remember to say *Shalom* to one neighbor and *As-Salāmu ‘Alaykum* to the other. We attend one another’s cultural festivals and acknowledge each other’s holidays. At the same time, however, we live in a city where highly educated landed immigrants work as janitors, where poverty and discrimination drive young men into

urban gangs, and where the local consequences of global conflicts leave scars that persist for generations. Yet, the presence of these problems does not signal that what Pico Iyer calls Toronto's "multicultural experiment" has failed. Rather, they remind us that multiculturalism is a process requiring a deep and longstanding commitment to confronting and dealing with its challenges as well as its ideals. In this sense we owe a great debt to the city's writers for unflinchingly revealing the weaknesses—and strengths—of the multicultural city, because even if in the process we learn not only positive but also unpleasant things about ourselves, at least we will have been open to learning.

NOTES

¹ This is not to suggest any absurd realism regarding *scientific* meanings and truths, regarding meanings and truths in the stories—theories—we deem *scientific*. No meaning can here be supposed material in itself. This is only to suggest that meanings and truths are made scientific by remaining open to material testing, that scientific meanings and truths are adopted and, more importantly, rejected subject to material criteria.

² The jury seems to be hung by the question if and how we can learn from history—or if we are doomed always to repeat it.

³ It goes beyond current scope even to begin distinguishing different sorts of principles: scientific, cultural, legal and so forth. Here it can only be suggested that principles are essentially the same, and that what varies is their deployment in alternate modalities of discourse. Principles remain fundamentally the same, but there are far fewer opportunities for turning unprincipled in mathematics than in politics. Hence, one implication is that cultural meaning has more mathematical than political character. It wouldn't be quite as absurd to become culturally unprincipled as to become mathematically unprincipled. Not quite, but almost.

⁴ Zizek owes much to Herbert Marcuse's (1969) essay, "Repressive tolerance."

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