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imagining canada:

AN OUTSIDER'S HOPE FOR A GLOBAL FUTURE

pico iyer

the inaugural hart house lecture, 2001

author's note:

The author would like to extend sincerest thanks to Hart House, and its Warden, Margaret Hancock, for issuing the invitation to him to think more about Canada's place in the global future; to John Fraser, Master of Massey College, for hospitality during his stay in Canada; and to Patricia Grant and Christine Campbell and, especially, Mike Morgan and Peter MacLeod for making the whole experience such a pleasant one, and for helping to confirm him in his dangerous assumption that Toronto might be one of the most enlightened cities on the planet.

This book is dedicated to all those who hope to make good on the promise of Canada.

foreword

From its inception, the inaugural Hart House Lecture has inspired debate about visions of our place in the world. Organized by students, it will create a public conversation with young people about issues related to personal and collective identity as well as the responsibilities of active citizenship. We hope to engage the wider community in a discussion about ourselves as individuals and as a country. For Hart House, the gathering place for the University of Toronto and the historic home for debate, discussion and dissent, the lecture is a fitting medium through which the House can nurture civic leadership and participation.

To fulfill such aspirations, the expectations for the first speaker at the inaugural lecture were almost unattainable. Imagine our astonishment when Pico Iyer listened to our dreams across oceans, telephone lines and email connections and presented us with this extraordinary lecture.

Pico Iyer challenges us to imagine Canada as "a space between". This idea resonates because it links the substance of the lecture with the essential role of Hart House. Pico expresses the desire and necessity to create a common vision for our local, national and global communities, to heal hate and division through vision, to make the process of mingling cultures one which results in a future of peace and fulfillment.

Pico seems to imply, and I would agree, that it is in these inbetween spaces that the unexpected and profound can occur. We hope this lecture series will occupy a sort of middle space, bridging the interests of students, who each year will coordinate this series, with the public good. Through the Hart House Lecture, we want to expand the capacity of Canadians to create a vibrant, supple and imaginative nation. With this brilliant inaugural lecture, Pico Iyer has created a space in which these dreams live.

— *Warden Margaret Hancock*

imagining canada:

**AN OUTSIDER'S HOPE
FOR A GLOBAL FUTURE**

Several years ago, a book arrived on my doorstep, and it was like no other novel I could remember reading. Its characters were all spirits of a kind, rootless, and drifting far from home, and all of them had gathered, like partial ghosts, in a shelled nunnery at the end of World War II. At their center was a young woman from "Upper America," as she called it, with a name that could have been Czech or Japanese or even—who knows?—Canadian. At her side was an Indian named for kippers who hungered for stories about Toronto, "as if it were a place of peculiar wonders." Stealing in and out of their presence was a wanderer with the highly baroque Italian name of Caravaggio, though he, too, was a foreigner in the Italy where they found themselves, and came, as it happened, from Toronto. And lying in bandages in their midst was a "desert Englishman," without a name and almost without a face, whose origins and identity were always

mostly in shadow.

The book possessed me in ways both mysterious and easy to explain. Its scenes, precise, ornamental, full of exotic information, made me feel as if I were walking through a series of bejeweled chambers, sensual and deliberate and arched, a kind of literary Alhambra. The action was presided over by Renaissance murals and suffused with the spirits of Tacitus and Herodotus and Kipling, yet it felt as fresh as tomorrow, with the characters exchanging stories of desert winds and streets of parrots, golden temples and tropical spices. The love-scenes, charged with the lapis elegance of high Arabic poetry, threw open the windows of the stuffy house of English letters to let in a new, an intoxicating, light.

Yet the truest attraction of the novel for me lay in something deeper: for even as it scrutinized the past and positioned its characters in scenes now fifty and sixty years behind us, it seemed to me not so much a historical novel rooted in what is now the last century as a revolutionary one, charting the outlines of a new world, in which strangers could interact and love and talk in a new kind of way, "unconscious of ancestry". And if it didn't read like the traditional English novels I'd grown up with at school, it also didn't read like a typical novel from North Africa or Sri Lanka; it was something else, outside familiar categories. The Cold War had ended three years before the book came out, and geopoliticians were telling us that all the old divisions were now extinct; but in *The English Patient* this new world order was a fact of life, and any assumptions you might make about the nationalities of its characters—that the English patient was English, say, or that the one enlisted in the British Army was British—would be wrong. At the very moment when the world was being convulsed by nationalistic divisions, and people were being killed on the basis of the passports they carried, or their religions, these four semi-posthumous beings told us we could define ourselves in new ways and step into a different kind of community.

"We were German, English, Hungarian, African—all of us insignificant to them," reminisced the title character as he thought back to a "desert society" before the war in which all kinds of people flowed together in a common cause, no borders or distinctions visible in the sand. "Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations." His closest associate among the explorers had died, he recalled, because of nations; categories could quite literally be fatal. And as the four figures circled around one another in the candlelight, all "international bastards" in *The English Patient's* pungent phrase, they moved, as the narrative kept putting it, like separate planets, "planetary strangers."

This vision of people turning like stars, independent universes almost, too large and mysterious to be pushed into the boxes of application forms, so excited me that I went back to Michael Ondaatje's previous novel, *In the Skin of a Lion*, and found that it concerned the people, mostly immigrants, who helped build Toronto in the 19th century. They were not map-makers and explorers, in this case, but bridge-builders, though really it came to the same thing: their lives had been devoted to making a connection between two different worlds, old and new, or East and West. *The English Patient* was a sequel, I came to understand, which was describing the next stage in Toronto's foundation, imagining a neutral zone in the middle of war—a space between, in some respects—in which strangers from different worlds could come and heal their wounds, in part by sharing stories, kisses, blood.

I don't know how much of this is what Michael Ondaatje consciously intended, but I do know that he could not help but be influenced by his own multicultural background, growing up in Sri Lanka, going to school in England and then coming to a Toronto where it might have seemed that many of his different homes from Asia, Europe and North America were coming together. The writer's mixed-race siblings—or "mongrels," as he might provocatively have called them—lived, I learned, on four different continents even now.

And his quietly visionary book, making the Old World new by filling it with other worlds and pasts, spoke with particular beauty to a typically mongrel modern reader like myself who was born in England, into an Indian household, and was officially living in California (while spending most of my time in Japan).

The sudden appearance of the book on my doorstep had another, and a more practical aptness because, just three months before I entered its universe, I had taken my first trip to Toronto, the ideal waystation for a traveler from California who wanted to go to Cuba (and a reminder, too, that Canada was exempt from many of the enmities of its neighbor to the south, and still enjoyed cordial relations with places deemed un-American). As I walked around the city, stepping across centuries and continents each time I crossed a side-street, I found myself, as many people had told me I would, in the East Coast city of my dreams, the kind you see only in movies (in part, of course, because idealized visions of Boston or Washington or New York are generally set in Toronto, just as the San Francisco or Seattle of the world's imagination is usually shot in Vancouver). I went to a ballgame at the SkyDome, I looked at "Indian-Pakistani-

style Chinese" restaurants, I walked and walked among the shifting colors and sovereignties of Bloor Street, and everywhere I saw a confluence of tribes not so very different from what I would encounter in *The English Patient*. I even peered through the gates of the university where now we sit, and remembered how it had been the longed-for destination among those of us studying English Literature in England, in part because it was here that Northrop Frye had mapped out a whole design of the universal consciousness. In some ways, not so surprisingly, what I was seeing was a place with both the sense of history (and so the sense of irony) of the England where I'd grown up, and the sense of future (and so the sense of expansiveness) of the America where I'd come to make a new life.

The first time I'd ever set foot in Canada, I suddenly remembered, was in 1967, when, as a child, I was brought by my parents to see the World Expo in Montreal and, mini-passport in hand, learned to become a citizen of the new world order by stepping from national pavilion to national pavilion in a compressed distillation of the globe. Not long before, like many of our background, my parents and I had sat in Oxford and wondered whether to emigrate to Canada or California (we ultimately decided on the place that presented itself to us as "the Athens of the West," and later came to wonder whether we might not have been better off in Sparta).

Now, as I walked around what seemed to be a concrete, physical version of what *Wired* magazine, in honour of Marshall McLuhan had called "mosaic thinking," I felt I was seeing, in some respects, a liberated England and an elevated America that seemed ideal for an Indian who came at once from everywhere and nowhere. I recognized the skepticism I heard in many voices, but it seemed free of the bitterness it might have carried in England. I responded to the earnest optimism and hopefulness of the place, but it didn't feel as heedless of the past, and of grounding realities, as California often did. History was a given here, I suspected, as it was in *The English*

Patient, but it didn't have to be a confinement. I found myself exhilarated, too, by the quick-wittedness and intelligence of a culture that seemed free of the competitive bustle and noise I might expect to find in New York. Here, I thought, was all Manhattan's software without, so to speak, its hard drive.

This was a lot, perhaps, to see in just two days, en route to the vibrant mayhem of Havana. And the Torontonians I met expressed surprise and even alarm at my enthusiasm, inured as they doubtless are to the ravings of short-time visitors. As anywhere, they told me, the city was governed by a hierarchy that the innocent newcomer couldn't see, and that was no more eager to surrender power than any other status quo, as locked inside old resentments as anything in Britain or South Africa. The newspapers, besides, were full of the latest secessionist talk from Quebec; and the recent outburst of even small disturbances in the wake of the Rodney King verdict had everyone debating once again the virtues of multiculturalism.

Yet for all of that, I came away with a sense of possibility I hadn't felt as I'd traveled to other of the globe's defining multicultures, whether in Singapore or Cape Town or Melbourne, on the one hand, or in Paris and London and Bombay, on the other. On paper, at least the logic was clear: Toronto was the most multicultural city in the world, according to the U.N.'s official statistics and it was also, statistically, the safest big city in North America and, by general consensus, the best organized. Put the two facts together, and you could believe that a multiculture could go beyond the nation-states we knew and give new meaning to that outdated term, the "Commonwealth." Add further my sense that Toronto had the most exciting literary culture in the English-speaking world, and you could believe that it not only offered an example of how a country could be even greater than the sum of its parts, but presented visions of what that post-national future might look like.

It may seem, at this point, that what I was seeing was, as much as anything, a Canada of the imagination, a place that exists largely in the minds of people observing it from afar. As McLuhan himself said years ago, Canada is "a receptive ground for other people's fantasies." A Canadian might say that all I was responding to was the place that exists on paper, which has come out number one in the U.N.'s Human Development Index for five consecutive years. This was the land that looked ideal in theory partly because, for all its anxieties about its First Nations past and its Quebecois present, it was not hemmed in by the weight of its past, as the Old World could be, nor burdened by the promise of an unlimited future, as its neighbor in the New World often is. Canada has never had to harden its identity to fend off neighboring enemies, as Britain or France or Germany—or even Japan—has had to do; and yet at the same time

it has never had to throw over its whole identity as the other developed geographic giants, the U.S., the former Soviet Union and China have done. In the mind's eye, at least, it sits outside most fixed definitions and offers openness without chaos, the ideal foundation for what pundits at the London School of Economics call the "third way" and Buddhists might more spaciouly call the "Middle Way."

This is, of course, a notion that works most persuasively on paper, and those who live in the midst of its competing surfaces are unlikely to embrace it so whole-heartedly. Yet images do have a certain power, as anyone who has risked her life and gone across the world in search of the "American Dream" can tell you. Canada is not imprisoned in its image as its bigger or older neighbors may be, and there is no "Canadian Dream" in pop-cultural circulation; but it does have an image, and it is the one celebrated in *The English Patient*. It is the place set back a little from the dramas and urgencies of the world's conflicts, and for that very reason, best able to throw a kind of light on them. It is an in-between place in which those from broken worlds can step outside the ruins for a while and think about how to make a future in peace. A sanctuary, if you like, in which people from Britain and France, centuries-old enemies, can live side by side (after a fashion), and a demilitarized zone where India and Pakistan can come and play the cricket games that would set off riots if played in India or Pakistan.

Canadians themselves, like people anywhere, are often embarrassed about the compliments they receive from outsiders, especially because they're used to defining themselves with a qualification—part of the mystique of Canada is that it is the place that asserts itself in italics while the United States presents itself in bold capitals. And when they hear people talk as I am doing now, they will point out that the "next century" possibilities that I'm extolling disappear as soon as you're an hour out of Vancouver or Toronto, in rural communities that remain very much mired in the last century. Tennyson and Queen Elizabeth are at least as sovereign

here as Rohinton Mistry or the Tragically Hip. And yet the imaginative identity that Canada projects around the world still remains powerful and in its way unanswerable: Dixon, Ontario, Catherine Bush tells us, is one of the best known places in East Africa because it is the safe place of which many Somalis dream.

Canada, like any country, lives in two places at once—its existence in the world and its existence in the mind—and in this latter it enjoys blessings it would squander at its cost. It is the country, to the world, whose prime minister helped instigate the U.N. Peacekeeping Force, and it is the country whose law professor helped draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is the country that Negro spirituals in the 19th century code-named "Heaven," the last stop on the Underground Railroad where American slaves could step out into a real "land of the free," and it is the place where prisoners at Auschwitz imagined the personal effects that had been stripped from them would be kept. In the movies, it is Canadians who, for no apparent motive other than a sense of fairness, agitate for the release of Hurricane Carter; in realest life, as Michael Ignatieff reminded us in his Massey lecture of six months ago, it is a Canadian who sat as chief prosecutor at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda in the Hague. Canadians who hear all this may think of all the problems that remain and of all the ways in which their country doesn't live up to its image as it could and should; but a global traveler like Salman Rushdie comes here and sees "North America's Scandinavia."

It is the particular burden of Canada, of course, that, for decades, and for many people around the world, it has been described as the counter-America, the alternative New World that really is a kinder, gentler place where the thousand points of light can more easily be joined up. Even *The Dictionary of Canadian Quotations*, as Neil Bissoondath points out, devotes fewer than nine columns to the entry for "Canada" and more than 17 to the entry on "Canada and the

United States." This is doubly ironic given that so many Americans, when on the road, try to pass themselves off as Canadians so they'll receive a warmer welcome. And trebly ironic—or should I say "triplly"?—given that many more Canadians, proportionally, travel the world than Americans, in part because they were not brought up thinking they were in the center of the universe.

But at a deeper level, to someone like me, who's lived happily and gratefully in the U.S. for 35 years, Canada offers a particular kind of liberation precisely because it understands the nature of limitation. In the U.S., I always feel, newcomers are told to shed their pasts on arrival and commit themselves to the grand collective task of perpetual re-invention; in Canada, there seems to be a sense that a hundred pasts can be entertained at once, and in the very way in which they rub against one another, and blend and blur and merge, something new will arise. There is, to me, a tonic sense here that the future can only be as strong as its understanding of the past.

And when I think of this, I keep going back in my mind to those post-national souls converging in the ghostly space of the nunnery-turned-hospital in the near-ruins of 1945. It's surely no coincidence that the sun at their center is a nurse who regularly risks her life to tend to the broken beings all around, hoping to cure her own wounds by administering to those of others. The one she holds at night is a sapper, who risks his life every day to defuse bombs on behalf of a country not his own. The man in the bed is a famous map-maker known for his discovery of a new oasis that had long been lost. And even the fourth among them, a thief who serves to remind us that no community is purely heroic or law-abiding, devotes his nights to a kind of ad hoc redistribution of income and, in his sardonic way, speaks at one point of a "brave new world." All of them, it's hard not to notice, are healers and explorers, spiritual Canadians.

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I took all these thoughts with me back to California, visited Canada a few more times in the months that followed and thought about what Canada might represent as the new millennium approached. And just then another book arrived on my doorstep—or, more accurately, was pushed into my hands by my editor in New York, as the book he was proudest of publishing among the hundreds he was bringing out that year. It was a novel again, and it was set in a world not so different from that of *The English Patient*; yet it brought that book's vision closer to the present, in time and space, as if to nudge it forwards. Its action began, to be sure, during World War II, in Europe, but then it moved back to Toronto, which came to seem, once more, a haven of sorts, a place in which haunted souls could put their shattered lives in order and make a kind of sense, or even art, of all that they had lost. And then it moved back again to Europe,

and then again to Toronto, back and forth between the present and the past, the world that had made its characters and the world they hoped to make.

Fugitive Pieces deals insistently and unflinchingly with the Holocaust, and yet it deals with it in a New World way, seeing how people who had been almost broken by it could nonetheless move into a cleansed new world in which their identities could become something else and more. As its title suggests, it is, like *The English Patient* again, about putting together the pieces, but it tries to see how they can be pieced together into a kind of stained-glass whole; a vase that is glued together out of fragments, as Derek Walcott says, is a vase glued together out of love. And the characters in Anne Michaels's novel—no coincidence, I think—are translators, archaeologists, private historians; and, more than that, people who can see that "translation is a kind of transubstantiation" and who find in English the chance of making new lives for themselves in an "alphabet without memory." The past for them is "desperate energy, live, an electric field"—a nice anticipation of Kerri Sakamoto's eerie novel about new Canadians; the past is full of a wonder and wisdom, as well as a heartbreak, it would be foolish to surrender. And yet, as one of Michaels's migrants says, "in a foreign landscape, a man discovers the old songs."

Toronto is not the center of Michaels's novel, or its interests, and yet it is—again, no coincidence, I think—its setting, the place where its people get better, and Michaels presents an often incandescent vision of a city that, like Athens, is "an active port," and "a market, a caravansary" in which people come together to exchange their different songs and stories and pasts. A meeting-place in the desert, in its way; a city, as she puts it, "of forsaken worlds." For her grateful immigrants fleeing Nazi Europe and first arriving in Canada, it seems like a luxury hotel, an oasis of ease and abundance; and a hotel, I think, is not such a terrible way of thinking about society, all its inhabitants in their own separate, comfortable, well-serviced

spaces, yet with common areas downstairs for dining, dancing and attending to civic responsibilities. A network of individual privacies in a way, all with their own "DO NOT DISTURB" signs, and yet governed by a common set of rules and graced with a common set of spaces for recreation, convenience and the different contributions every guest can make.

The main characters in Michaels's novel are all shaky survivors scarred with watchfulness for life; yet there is one Canadian among them, Naomi, who, with her blunt crayon, as the narrative puts it, can rub away what's writ in blood. She becomes an audience for the secrets of those from the Old World, and to that extent an agent for their healing. "The only thing you can do for the dead," she knows, "is to sing to them."

As I put the novel down, I was moved almost beyond words by its message of hope and redemption, as I had been a few years before by *The English Patient*. But more than that, and as with *The English Patient* again, I was stirred and inspired by its procedure, a language singing and poetic and specific, and a structure utterly different from the linear narratives I'd met in the Fielding or Dickens books we read at school; here, as in Ondaatje's novel, was a quite literal, literary version of the "collage country" that Canada was said to aspire towards. It seemed to me that both books, in their flights of imagination, were undertaking a revolution of form as well as of content; and as in none of the traditional works of Thackeray or Jane Austen that I'd read, both of them ushered us into a world where there was no prevailing sense of status quo, and not even any central character. No perspective was more dominant than any other in these books, and there was no sense of a fixed hierarchy around which the characters had to arrange themselves. Indeed, theirs was a world of fragments, pieces, made out of the rubble of the old, and I came away with an exhilarating sense of open space and new horizons in which anything, so it seemed, was possible.

All this was especially moving to me, I think, because for many years—for all my life, really—I've been traveling the world looking at how different countries and people try to make sense of the multicultures we're all becoming. One of the unusual and potent things about the present moment, to me, is that the very issue that so many cultures and cities are facing is exactly the same one that more and more individuals such as me are confronting: how to fashion a sense of self or home when all the traditional co-ordinates are gone? And how to make a peace among the disparate, often competing cultures inside of us? How, in short, to begin to create a sense of direction—and foundation—when the world is spinning around us at the speed of light?

In recent years cyberspace has made of this disorientation and virtual borderlessness a new dimension, and given it a concrete face,

as it were; but for those of us who live with—and within—the displacements, the new questions sting and probe at a level far deeper than any computer-screen could suggest. And when, to take the example closest to hand, I ask myself how I might put together the California and England and India where I grew up, and the Cuba and Japan and Thailand and Tibet where I've spent most of my adult life, I feel a kind of satisfaction to see Canada and Toronto (and, in fact, the characters in *The English Patient*) asking, and trying to answer, the same question. For all of us, at both the individual and collective levels, the challenge is to create out of our different parts and pasts a choir that will rise higher than any of the ragged and incomplete voices that make it up.

Clearly, this is a pressing issue for all those international beings I call "global souls," growing up in the spaces between cultures and not sure of where their affiliation lies. But it also presses in on those people of more settled background who just find themselves living a new global lifestyle, flying from the tropics to a snowstorm, perhaps, simply to sign a contract or visit a parent. And it even affects the person who never moves at all, but who finds the world moving around her in ever more disconcerting ways. The young woman in Vancouver, perhaps, who, as she goes out of her grandmother's house to buy a carton of milk from the corner market, finds herself surrounded by languages she can't follow and customs she can't understand, all brought to her by people who, in her grandmother's youth, would have been on the far sides of the earth. Never before, I dare to suggest, have so many people been so surrounded by so much that is deeply alien to them. The Other, in some respects, is everywhere.

For twenty years or more, therefore, I've been traveling, for work and fun, but also to see what kinds of answers were being proposed to these next-century questions. I've spent a lot of time in Hong Kong, for example, which has the air often of a whole city turned into a transit lounge, a giant multinational convenience store set up for

people from somewhere else. Almost everyone in the makeshift city-state is an exile, an expat or a refugee; the only government there, traditionally, has been the marketplace; and the only language that everyone speaks is the dollar. Hong Kong looks to me often like a kind of website writ large, which answers all the daily needs of those who pass through it, without offering them the more sustaining values or customs that anchor them deep down. Likewise, I've found myself returning frequently to Atlanta, which on paper at least is one of the great players on the global stage, the home to CNN and Coca-Cola and Holiday Inn and U.P.S. Yet underneath the balance-sheets, that vast suburban sprawl seems as locked inside the black-and-white divisions of its distant past as if the Civil War had never ended, and when you visit its gleaming tower-blocks and convention centers reaching up into the 22nd century, you see all around them houses as orphaned and endangered as in any of the saddest nations of the world, almost half the city's children growing up in poverty.

As I try to think about what it is that really grounds and steadies us—and joins us at some level deeper than our circumstances—I've retreated several times a year, for ten years now, to a Benedictine hermitage in California, and I've also thought about language as perhaps the only portable home a global mongrel has, though my own language, in my lifetime, has, like the cities around it, gone from the clear distinctions of Henry James's world to the polymorphous mish-mashes of Salman Rushdie's. I've gone six times in the past 20 years to the Olympic Games, to see how the mingling of cultures plays out on that intensified and miniaturized stage, and to what extent the Olympic Village can serve as a kind of Platonic model of the global village. Yet the Olympics, famously, insists on national divisions at precisely the time when those are coming to seem most beside the point, and enshrines the cult of the flag when the logo is coming to seem more central.

I even, on this modern quest, spent a week once living around Los Angeles Airport (at the behest of a Torontonion, as it happens),

and tried to see how a great cathedral of transience, playing out the ageless human rites of parting and meeting and interacting with the foreign against a generic backdrop of shopping-malls, food courts and parking structures, might resemble a model, if hardly an inspiring one, of the city of the future. Dallas-Fort Worth Airport, after all, is larger than all Manhattan.

In some ways, though, the issue lived with me most even when I didn't seek it out, and just went back and forth between my mother's house in California and my girl-friend's apartment in Japan. For Los Angeles, as many of you know, is the kind of place that can make one most optimistic about Canada, a vast undifferentiated space that looks like a horizontal Babel even to the semi-native, a place in which no one's taken the time and trouble to think about how to stop its parts from flying off in all directions. All the countries of the world are there, but when a brilliant theatrical director tries to organize a "Festival of Los Angeles," he's defeated. And while an immigrant is warmly welcomed to its open spaces, she can easily feel herself welcomed to a vacuum in which no one knows where (or who) he'll be tomorrow, and all the smiles in the world don't make one feel any more American deep down.

In Japan, by easy contrast, I'm in the middle of a classically exclusionary culture which tries to hang on to its traditions, and preserve its sense of self in the accelerating world, by drawing firm boundaries around itself and stripsearching people who look like me. Even the foreigner who lives there for fifty years and speaks flawless Japanese will always and only be called a *gaijin*, or "outsider person."

In this context, it's hard not to be stirred by the Canadian option, and its refusal to believe, as U2 sing on their last album, that "hope and history don't rhyme." At the Olympics in Atlanta, in fact, I'd noticed how the Canadian 4 X 100' male sprinting team was formidable, in part, of course, because none of its members had been born in Canada (they all came from the West Indies, and were

up against the West Indians who made up the teams of Britain, France and, naturally enough, Trinidad). Those who live in Canada will remind me that the country embraced Ben Johnson as a Canadian when he won his gold medal in Seoul, and then wrote him off as a Jamaican as soon as he was stripped of it. But the fact remains that Canada does occupy a kind of middle ground between the antiseptic tyranny of Singapore, say—Disneyland as city-state—and the unregulated swarm of Los Angeles. And every time a Serbian from Edmonton, perhaps, meets and marries an Indian from Montreal—and such liaisons, though not frequent, are growing more common by the day—the little girl who arises out of their union will be even harder to characterize as anything but Canadian. Ideally, she may even think of Croatians and Pakistanis as her neighbors.

Insofar as self-definition is the issue of the day, worldwide, Canada has something distinctive to give the world, and insofar as more and more people are trying to think about how to deal with foreignness, more and more people are becoming aspirant Canadians. Canada, if only because it had to, was thinking about multiculturalism—and globalism and pluralism—before the rest of us even knew the words existed. To this day, moreover, it's juggling both sides of a bilingual identity, and doing so across five and a half time zones. And though cities like Paris and London and New York are all as mongrel as Vancouver or Montreal, in their way, all of them, I think, are less able to revise their identities to accommodate the new—and less inclined to acknowledge the mongrelism that isn't a part of their chosen image. The Old World tends to hide behind its past, while diffuse and scattered America seems too large and too out of breath, or too weighed down under pressures, to think about where it's going.

When first I began visiting Canada, it seemed to me that the country, because of its 250 years of experimenting with such issues,

was already well embarked on Act 2 or even 3 of a drama that elsewhere was in its prologue. Not so much because of the official Multiculturalism Act of 1971 as because of the simple fact that multiculturalism was a daily reality for most of the people smelling foreign spices through their windows. And although that is no less true of Kuala Lumpur, say, the native multiculture where I wrote much of this lecture, Kuala Lumpur is not being transformed every year by new immigrants from around the world, captivated by its spaces as they are by those of the "magnetic north." Very soon after I arrived in Toronto I found that I had only to pick up a newspaper, or strike up a conversation with a friend, and I was being introduced to levels of refinement in the discussion of crossing cultures that I simply hadn't met in a lifetime of traveling. I was introduced to all kinds of new terms here for the subtlest implications of migration—"allophone" and "landed immigrant" and "barrel children" and, of course, "middle power"; but I was also exposed to complications and problems I'd seldom run into before. Just three months ago I was in Amman, and was talking to a Jordanian high-school senior who was wondering where to go to college: the U.S., Britain, Lebanon, Dubai—or Canada. His parents didn't want him to come to Canada, where he was keenest to go, because they didn't want him just to socialize with other Jordanians. Montreal, they felt, had become a suburb of Amman.

In certain respects, therefore, Canada has written the book on the very issues that are coming to seem the governing ones of the next century. And it's no coincidence, I think, that it was here that McLuhan dreamed of and drafted a new wired planetary universe, while his colleague, Frye, leapt towards a globalism of the soul, helped, no doubt, by the fact that he came to the world's literature with an eye that was neither traditionally British nor American. Canada was the place that invited Jane Jacobs to come and try to make practical her vision of what a North American city could be, human-scaled and diverse, with "urban villages" instead of "inner

cities" and an array of walkable neighborhoods downtown that could make the notion of a mosaic visible.

Canadians, as Michael Ignatieff tells us, are among the ones who have gone farthest in discussing what rights might mean in a world that has gone global—how responsibility might play out in an extraterritorial context—and it is the Canadian Charles Taylor who introduced the notion of "recognition" to political philosophy. Ignatieff himself, I think, must have been moved by his Canadian upbringing towards the abiding interest in nationalism and belonging that he now carries with him around the world. When I was growing up in Santa Barbara, the local literary sage was the Canadian Hugh Kenner, who defined, in his Massey Lectures of a few years ago, another important principle of the Canadian imagination which defines the particular power of someone like Anne Carson—"High and low cultures aren't in opposition," he wrote: "the more you know of either, the more you enjoy the other." And again, it seems no coincidence to me that the person who defined the very notion of "Generation X" came from Vancouver, or that the one who is credited with coining the word "cyberspace" moved up from America to live there.

Much of this may strike you as the wishful optimism of a starry-eyed visitor with a confirmed ticket out next week, and Canada has always perhaps been too easy a notion for foreigners to play with, a seemingly malleable idea without the weight and responsibilities of the United States. But an outsider, at least, is prompted to do things that a local might not, and sometimes in the process to see the things that a more daily eye overlooks. He may make two long expeditions to Honest Ed's (as I did) or (as I did again) to the Canadian Hockey Hall of Fame; he may take drives around Mississauga, looking at its shopping malls, and pop in on a Korean church on Bloor Street to hear what a new Canadian sermon sounds like. Most of all, he may

see all this, as suggested before, with the eyes of someone from Los Angeles, a typical modern mongrel city which seems to be speeding into a post-national future willy-nilly, making up the rules—insofar as it has any rules—as it goes along. The one other great asset that Canada enjoys, after all, is one that many locals have long seen as a blight: the fact that it is next to the world's only superpower, and the non-stop blast of its pop culture. Yet in a world in which more and more countries wake up to find that America is just down the street, this too places Canada in the position of an elder statesman.

I often think, in all these contexts, of my grandparents, all four of whom were born in India. For all of them, I think, there came at birth a very strong, perhaps oppressively strong, sense of where they belonged, what they believed, who their friends and enemies were and where they would likely pass all of their days. Now, for more and more of us, the very facts that were a given for our grandparents are, you could say, a chosen; we have the chance—which is also a challenge—to invent from scratch our sense of tradition, of neighborhood, of home and even of self. The oldest and simplest question in the world—"Where do you come from?"—suddenly brings new and more open-ended answers, or no answers at all for those strong enough to live in the spaces between categories.

And when I think of the ways in which inheritance is perhaps less important than it's ever been before, I can better understand why global possibility these days so often travels on a Canadian passport. For what struck me on my earliest visits to Canada was that all these issues, of identity and belonging and new forms of citizenship, were on the table every day, and by that I mean not just the conference tables of polysyllabic government institutions, but, again, the breakfast tables of ordinary people, compelled to think about what a neighborhood means in a world in which everyone on the street is speaking a different language. Walking down the street, and talking to people who seemed so self-consciously to be thinking about the issues that those I knew in Bombay or Los Angeles or

London didn't have the time or inclination to address, I came away at times with a sense, often invigorating, of a new set of Founding Fathers drafting the bill of rights for a new kind of community, diasporan, rainbow-colored, fluid and post-national. A "Royal Canadian Multiculture," as I sometimes thought of it, blending its old elements with its new. Such efforts were almost bound to be too earnest, too ham-handed and too self-conscious (and self-consciousness, Canada sometimes taught me, is the opposite of self-confidence), yet at least there was a sense here that the mingling with the Other was a fact of life that had to be addressed. In that sense, I wasn't surprised to see that the very meaning of citizenship in a borderless world, and how democracy can be made meaningful and active, was the theme of another University of Toronto philosopher, Mark Kingwell, in his most recent book, *The World We Want*. "Otherness," he writes, in a phrase that catches much of what I'm talking about, "is imagination's best tutor."

It was probably just as my enthusiasm for Canada, and its expertise in all these matters, was cresting that another book came into my life, and this one, perhaps happily, was less forgiving of my assumptions. When I made my way through Neil Bissoondath's slashing attack on multiculturalism, *Selling Illusions*, I was constantly sobered, not because so much of it seemed wrong, but rather just the opposite: for long stretches I felt myself agreeing with his every word so strongly that I found I might have written his book (or he might have written some of mine). Official multiculturalism, he argued, almost irresistibly, proposed a kind of racism as a supposed cure for racism, defining people entirely in terms of their ethnic origins and to that extent confining them to divisions that would always set them apart and locked inside their pasts. The affirmative action that was often multiculturalism's handmaiden seemed mostly to attempt to redress the injustices of the past by creating new injustices in the

future. For Bissoondath, the multiculturalism that Canada sponsored turned "ethnic communities into museums of exoticism," gladly celebrating "the Other" at the level of foods and festivals, but not really inviting those who looked different into the city's inner workings, and so, in effect, encouraging foreigners to remain colorfully foreign as if they were still pavilions in the World Expo I'd visited as a boy. Toronto, he wrote of the city that had especially captivated me, is "the intolerance capital of Canada."

I had to listen carefully to this argument because it echoed so much of what I'd heard from people I talked to in Canada, especially those referred to, in one of the less happy local terms, as "visible minorities," and also because I felt that Bissoondath was thinking about the issue more rigorously than those who just sang of Canada's tolerance (or those who wrote diatribes against racism funded by Multicultural Committees). Pierre Trudeau had introduced official multiculturalism, Bissoondath wrote, to advance other agendas of his own, and it had served the happy second function of assuaging liberal unease without really changing anything deep down. It offered tolerance, with all the gritted-teeth self-consciousness and even condescension that that implies, in place of real acceptance.

I took Bissoondath's argument seriously, not least, of course, because he wrote with the wisdom of one who'd grown up in that swarming de facto multicultural, Port of Spain; he was one of the "global souls" I felt at home with. His claim that official quotas seemed to avoid the issue of racial inequality rather than confront it by placing a Band-Aid over the Atlantic Ocean—to put it in my own terms—reflected exactly what I'd read in earlier critics such as Bharati Mukherjee (who'd actually moved to Atlanta, of all places, because of her disgust with Canadian hypocrisy, as she saw it). Yet I was most grateful to Bissoondath because he clarified for me exactly what multiculturalism should and shouldn't be. The policies he was attacking, so persuasively, were the literal-minded, often heavy-

handed policies of a government that tried to legislate decency and to administer fairness from above. The multiculturalism I believed in took place mostly on the level of the individual, and the imagination through which he tried to penetrate the Other and let the Other penetrate him.

In a way, Bissoondath's book sent me back to *The English Patient* yet again, and reminded me precisely of why I had found that book so inspiring. The vision it advanced had nothing to do with government agencies or institutional white papers; rather, it arose simply from human beings ready to respond to others on a level deeper than their customs, clothes or color. It tried to make real Aziz's airy hope in *A Passage to India* that "The song of the future must transcend creed." It was only at the level of the imagination, after all, that we could begin to think differently about one another, and to make meaningful an acceptance so natural that we didn't need to have words for it. Official multiculturalism, Bissoondath concludes, is "ethnicity as public policy; it is society's view of the individual's assigned place within its construct." Real multiculturalism, I thought, would be individualism as private practice: the individual's view of society's shifting orders around it.

Canada was defining and exploring these themes on the page, but the pages I trusted were not so much the ones that flooded out of bureaucratic offices, however well-intentioned, but, rather, those that issued forth from individual souls at their desks, looking out at the streets of Montreal or Vancouver, and seeing Bombay, Dar es Salaam or Port of Spain. Indeed, the kind of pages I trusted most were the ones I found in works of fiction like *Digging Up the Mountains*, written by the new Canadian called Neil Bissoondath, in which immigrants from everywhere assemble in Canada and think about issues of migration in a way that can have no easy solution on the human plane. Bissoondath's characters in his stories take us into displacement and liberation (or its absence) more plangently, more vividly, than anything in his non-fiction could, and they remind

us that many of those who have come to Canada have come from Sri Lanka or Rwanda or South Africa precisely to be rid of a tribalism at home that never seems to go away. Besides, foreignness in practice has effects on us that can never be anticipated, sometimes as wildly positive as negative. "A man not of your own blood," Ondaatje writes, "can break upon your emotions more than someone of your own blood."

There was another dimension to Bissoondath's concern, of course, and that was the enduring fear that diversity can just lead to disorder—a global Los Angeles in a way, where no shape or coherence is visible amidst the swam of relativities, and each group simply retreats into its own corner to practice its own customs and worship its own gods. The mosaic becomes a collection of jangled shards, more than likely to draw blood, and a country that exults in existing between the spaces ends up neither here nor there: too many cultures spoil the broth. When Bissoondath explained that Quebec appealed to him in part because it drew strong lines around itself and consolidated its identity instead of letting itself blur into vagueness, I saw a very good description of why I felt steadied and often solaced by Japan, which kept itself distinctive in part by trying to keep out people who looked like me. Differences cannot just be wished away.

There is a political and practical answer to this fear of cultural unraveling, and it's the one that has been put forward eloquently by the likes of Michael Ignatieff and Pierre Pettigrew, stressing that one of the great benefits of Canada's history is that it's never been in a position in which it could easily present itself as a "One Nation" state, and so never been likely to confuse political and ethnic identity. We can't do without larger groups or organizations altogether—when they find themselves in a desert individuals inevitably gather into groups—and however much we live "unconscious of ancestry,"

we can't all be one. Yet Canada, from birth, has had to be held together by shared beliefs and not shared roots, as if it were the political extension of that "moral fiction," as Ignatieff calls it, by which we're all one in the eyes of the law. "To believe in rights is to believe in defending difference," Ignatieff writes in *The Rights Revolution*. "Pluralism does not mean relativism. It means humility."

Yet an even stronger answer, I thought, came in the vision of art as a preserver and generator of images that stands above all racial and ideological differences, joining us together by commanding our collective gaze. Gods can be divisive; images or pictures of gods need not be: anyone, whether Jewish or Moslem or Hindu, can be moved and uplifted by a Madonna. And where the administrator tries, inevitably, to abstract humanity, and turn a whole group into a single category, the imaginative writer, the novelist, does the opposite, seeing how a single being can contain a hundred different cultures, and trying always not to simplify but to complexify, to voyage deeper into ambiguity. The artist is not concerned with categories of black and white (one hopes) unless she's writing a non-fictional argument; her concern is with Sonam or Desiree—or that uncategorizable being called Hana. Indeed, the one sovereign presence in *The English Patient* that watches over the characters in the ruins of their crumbling world, and that they sometimes watch in turn, is the Renaissance art surrounding the Tuscan villa. "There is no order," the novelist writes, "but for the great maps of art."

As I was thinking all this, books kept streaming into my living-room, and even though I'm no formal student of Canada or its literature, I kept on finding that the most radiant and unprecedented novels that came my way came from the often forgotten country up north; it became clear to me why my aforementioned editor in New York, himself a global soul who had been born into a diplomatic family in India, educated in England and come to America to run one of its most venerable publishing houses, had declared, years ago, that Toronto was "the new literary capital of the northern hemisphere." Many of these books did not explicitly discuss mongrelism or a next-century community, but inevitably these issues passed through their backgrounds insofar as their settings were Canadian. I got to visit Zanzibar, as I'd never done on the page or in person, through the Canadian novelist, M.G. Vassanji; I got to see how the floating new order of College Street was still haunted by the ghosts of a

changeless village in the old country in Nino Ricci's beautiful trilogy. And in the immortal works of Rohinton Mistry, I saw my parents' own hometown, Bombay, somehow elevated to the highest reaches of English literature, and accorded a dignity we might expect to find in Hardy or Hugo.

It's easy to say that Canadian literature has enjoyed an astonishing resurgence in part because Canadian literature now so often comes from, and deals with, Sri Lanka and Bombay and Eastern Europe; but what gives it especial potency is that these new voices are still surrounded by the distinguished voices of an older Canada. The first thing that struck me about Michael Ondaatje's anthology of Canadian literature, *From Ink Lake*, was that its voices came from Malta, South Africa, the West Indies; the second thing that struck me was that one of the most memorable stories, "The Man from Mars," came from the classically Canadian Margaret Atwood, and was about how a new Canadian might look to a young female student who can't begin to place the immigrant around her. Was he Chinese or Japanese or Vietnamese? And if from the last, from the North or South?

Atwood's writing is essential in this context if only because it does have a center, and it tells us of the structures and traditions against which the new Canadian has to define herself; though she's a radical and a futurist in her own way, Atwood seems, more and more, a voice of an indigenous Canada (as I might subversively call it), registering how the new Canada can seem threatening or even malign to someone who recalls the old. In her most recent novel, the Booker Prize-winning *Blind Assassin*, Atwood uses a protagonist who's known Toronto since the '20s to express a certain wryness about the fact that the words to "O Canada" seem to be permanently in flux, and people affirm "their collective pride," as she puts it, "in something we can't pronounce." Suddenly the world of her youth—the Canada of white spaces and trackless wilderness that Atwood described in her 1972 survey of Canadian writing, *Survival*—is

splintering into all the colors of the rainbow, and "Toronto the Grey," as she sometimes calls it, is rich with "oranges and lemons bright as a sunrise, and mounds of sugar and mountains of yellow butter." Toronto's "no longer a Protestant city," her feisty narrator pronounces, "it's a medieval one," and when she says that, I find myself thinking of a souq, a caravansary again, like the "meeting place" that the word "Toronto" means in Iroquois. A city, Aristotle tells us, is "a unity of unalikes."

Paris and London and New York have all been havens for exile writers, too, of course—though America, remember, has no Minister of Culture and no Harbourfront Writers' Festival—and many places have allowed migrants to write in ways they could never have written at home: Shyam Selvadurai probably could not have written of gay life in Sri Lanka so long as he stayed in Sri Lanka, and Rohinton Mistry might not have been able to evoke so vividly the Bombay of the '70s and his youth had he been surrounded by the MTV-happy, fast-changing Bombay of the '90s. But beyond such universal truths of displacement, Canada presents its newcomers with a particular opportunity: they arrive here from all four corners of the world, and, looking around them, see that they are surrounded by people from the other three corners (sometimes even by the ones they've come here to avoid). Almost inevitably they find themselves thinking about what it means to live in a community of strangers.

Only a few weeks ago, I picked up, on a whim, Catherine Bush's marvelous and strange novel, *The Rules of Engagement*, and there it was again: her protagonist, researching war in London, had taken pains to leave her native Toronto behind, and yet Toronto had left her with an interest in exile, dislocation, reinvention. At one point, after she returns, refugees from very different worlds agree to meet in a Toronto haunt called The Transit Lounge (not unlike, I thought, Anne Michaels's use of the similar term in the context of Toronto,

"The Way Station"). Earlier in the action, two characters had staged a Victorian duel in the middle of post-modern Toronto and the whole plot turns on the fact that one of the most forged and coveted contraband items in the world today is a Canadian passport. When Bush writes of people living in houseboats on the canals of London, floating between settled places, it's hard not to think she's writing metaphorically, of a different way of defining home.

This familiarity with the realities of modern warfare and the lives of desperate refugees—surprising to me in the young protagonist of what could be seen as a coming-of-age novel—is crucial because, when one talks of "global souls" living in several places all at once, one has to recall that the process is taking place on two levels simultaneously, and the distance between them seems greater than it has ever been before. On the one hand, there are all the multinational businessmen and computer wizards and tribal backpackers—even, perhaps, a few international writers—who move between continents in an afternoon, six miles above the earth, and make their homes in the spaces between; at the same time, however, there is a much larger population on the ground forced out of its homes in the old, ancestral ways, because of famine or poverty or war. The number of refugees in the world has gone up ten-fold since I was in high-school, and if you count unofficial refugees, its total comes to perhaps 100 million, or twice as many people as live in Canada and Australia put together. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees, set up in 1951 to deal with the chaos at the end of World War II—the world of *The English Patient*, in effect—has had its mandate renewed again and again, to the point where the temporary agency recently celebrated its 50th birthday. Refugees, a U.N. official told *Time* a few years ago, "are one of the growth industries of the '90s."

In some ways, this seems to be the most urgent issue of globalism, the spaces between us increasing even as our ads tell us the world is growing smaller, and again it is an issue that Canada has

had to think about at the most achingly human level. Refugees, asylum, immigrant quotas are part of the texture of daily life and daily conversation here. And precisely because Canada is not defining the economic and political terms of the global order, as its American neighbor sometimes seems to be doing, it's in a perfect position to ask uncomfortable questions about what globalism costs, and how much the quality of life may be being superceded by the quantity. Long before demonstrators were taking to the streets of Seattle, I was finding young Canadians asking how the word "global" could be attached to something other than "markets" and "networks"; how, in fact, we might begin to fashion a "global conscience."

Almost everything I've said so far, as you will have noticed, comes down to a single point: the space between. Most of the creative energy in our lives, as individuals and as communities, seems to me to come from the gap between categories, the life between the cracks. As Salman Rushdie suggests in his last novel, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, the person who lives outside the circle is the one best able to see the larger picture. In certain ways this sense of imaginative space seems particularly made for a Canada that has always occupied a relatively neutral space in reality and in imagination: a version of Europe that doesn't think everything has to be the way it was yesterday, and a part of North America that doesn't expect everything to be different by tomorrow. The refugee or immigrant, it almost goes without saying, lives in that very space, too, the space between the home he's left and the new life he's hoping to create.

It's customary to talk of Canada as the country defined by its lack of definition, the land of "unmanifest destiny", as you could call it, whose anxious idealists are always worrying about how they fit into the larger scheme of things. But more and more this point of unfinishedness is where transformation takes place as the world begins to prize speed more than weight and fluidity more than stability. Canada has long been a byword for open space, and the more the world moves towards a kind of "deracination state," or state of global floatingness, the more Canada's very freedom from fixity, and its openness to experimentation, may make it the envy of its more encumbered neighbors to the east and south.

This is, of course, an idea familiar to everyone since McLuhan first asserted that Canada's "multiple borderlines" and "low-profile identity" would make it ideally suited to the new centrifugal, mobile world that has indeed, as he predicted, come to pass. It is what lies behind Pierre Pettigrew's economic and political ideas, delivered with a freshness and imagination unusual for a politician, in *The New Politics of Confidence*, and it is what animates B.W. Powe's soaring alchemical vision in *A Canada of Light* (whose original title, from Saul Bellow, *A Tremendous Canada of Light*, might have been too soaring for those who think of the country as "America with an asterisk"). Even Hugh Kenner wrote of "between-ness" in his "Case of the Missing Face" and McLuhan characteristically turned the idea into a soundbyte: "The interface is where the action is."

Yet what gives me most hope, in a way, and what these Canadians have been too shy to assert at times, is that the very fact that Canadians so often criticize Canada for being too racist or too stuffy or too something is a source of hope: the country is holding itself to high standards, and asking questions of itself with a searchingness I don't see in Liverpool or Atlanta. Things don't have to be the way they always have been, I hear Canadians saying, even if they're not going to be remade by tomorrow. The very motto of the Order of Canada says, in Latin, "They desire a better country."

"Canada is worth defending not just as a country but as an idea of a country," Myrna Kostash writes ringingly at the end of her *Next Canada*, and Canada for her is as much a moral as a cultural notion. Jacques Attali, in his *Dictionary of the 21st Century*, defines Canada as the place that could be a "democratic country without borders where everyone will be simultaneously a member of several communities that were formerly mutually exclusive." But the thought I like best here is Emerson's: everywhere man wants to be settled, he tells us, but only insofar as he is unsettled is there any hope for him.

We live, I think, at a curious moment in the planet's history, when the strongest power on the globe is also one of the youngest, and technology daily deletes memory and history. Yesterday, I suspect, has never seemed so distant. The future is as intoxicating as it always is, full of new toys that promise to help us live in ways that were inconceivable just a decade ago; and yet our sense of possibility, I think, is only as strong as our appreciation of what does not and should not change. And our enjoyment of technology can only be as powerful as our understanding of what technology cannot do or help. Progress is best appreciated by those who see that it involves going backwards, towards the essential and the deep, as much as going forwards.

That is one reason, as you can tell, why Canada inspires me: I'd rather entrust the future to writers of fiction than to software writers, in part because the former have a strong sense of where we've been

as well as of where we're going; and I'd rather the Other be explored and celebrated by novelists than by many-headed committees, in part because writers have a sense of contingency and idiosyncrasy. "We are communal histories, communal books," the English patient says, going about his careful reversal of *Kim*, and the idea becomes liberating in part because he, and the people around him, are all unassimilated mavericks in their way, odd men out. The luminous vision of *Fugitive Pieces* cannot be translated into public policy, but it gives each of us, in our private moments, a sense of how to think of our lives differently and how to remake them in that light. Politics is still too often local while fiction travels the world.

The creation of a community and the creation of a work of art have a lot in common, as both these books remind us: both begin with a vision, a product of thoughtfulness and imagination, and then both try to find a structure so that the vision can be communicated to the world. That is one way in which poets can be "unacknowledged legislators of mankind," in Shelley's words. And in my travels, which often take me to three or four countries in a week, I haven't come across many stirring visions of the future in Los Angeles or Hong Kong or Paris. They may be on their way, but for now there's no South African English Patient, and no *Fugitive Pieces* in Atlanta. The plural and protean identities that Canadians have been juggling, if only in their minds, for decades are only now becoming realities for members of the European Union, say.

An outsider's first obligation, when he visits a place, is to take in its moral and emotional complexities, and so appreciate the ways in which what may be so pleasing for him can be less exalting for the resident. I read Neil Bissoondath, therefore, and Bharati Mukherjee, and listen too, when John Bentley Mays, an American who loves Toronto and has chosen to live here, tells me that it has a "clannish" sense and a habit of "self-segregation" more divisive than in any

other city that he knows. I hear Canadians, especially of African descent, talk of "racism with a smile on its face," and when I visit a school in Scarborough, and learn that 70% of the students come from homes where English is not the spoken language, I am reminded that creating a common vision isn't going to be easy. Immigrants bring rhythms and colors and books to their new homes, but they also bring suspicions and resentments and fears. The Tamil Tigers recruit for members in that high-school, and ethnic groups regularly tear up their old enemies' flags at City Hall.

Yet the only way to begin to heal division, as I see it, is through vision; and the only way to start doing things differently is by thinking differently. Hate, as Graham Greene writes, is just a failure of the imagination: the inability truly to imagine how the world looks to that person across the table, and how we look to him. An Indian, I can say from experience, only begins to step outside the enmities and divisions of his parents when he stops identifying himself as Indian, and moves towards a larger definition—or, perhaps best of all, settles inside a space outside all definitions. He may learn how to do that—Canada has taught me—by reading the fiction of a fellow immigrant from Italy.

I say all this as someone who has spent only a few weeks in Canada, addressing those who have in many cases spent their whole lives here; but in an important sense that's the point of this whole lecture. An outsider imports hope to a community, in part by seeing the blessings that its locals may take for granted; and he brings them the wondering and grateful eyes of someone who knows the lesser alternatives elsewhere. A newcomer also imports the determination of one given a second chance, to make one's life something different. Canada's particular glory to me lies in the fact that it is a country so much made for and by outsiders; and though its drawbacks are visible to us all, they must be seen in the light of a Britain, say, where, as recently as 1990, someone who looked like me was fifty times more likely to be beaten up than someone who looked

like Johnny Rotten.

I end now, at long last, with a confession: throughout this talk I've used the highly unlovely word "mongrel" instead of the euphonious, government-approved word, "hybrid." I do this deliberately, in part to remind us that the process of mingling cultures is a messy one, rough at the edges and not easily soothed into placid euphemisms: every time two worlds cross, a spark of uncertainty and fear rises up between them, something visceral and primal that comes with a scent of danger. As Michael Ondaatje suggests with his use of the equally unsentimental term, "international bastards," the process of mixing may not be pretty, but it's no bad thing if one comes without a pedigree.

Indeed, in preparing for this evening, I went back to *The English Patient* one more time, and when I did so, I noticed something I'd never seen before. There aren't just four living beings in that Tuscan villa; there's a fifth. And as with everything in the book, the details of that fifth do not seem accidental. He is a dog, as it happens, who, Ondaatje writes, is "an old mongrel, older than the world." And as he peeps in and out of the action, more often than I'd expected, he begins to explain why dogs suddenly appear at a dance in Cairo, and why *The English Patient's* lover sees him at one point, as a "dog in clothes." The mongrel, the book seems to suggest—and I agree—may be the herald of a new world.

a note on the author:

Pico Iyer is the author of six books, including *Video Night in Kathmandu*, *Falling Off the Map* and *Cuba and the Night* (a novel). His most recent book, *The Global Soul*, about the culture and people of the 21st century, is devoted in part to investigating Toronto and Canada as models of a global future.

a note on the type:

The text of this book was set in Scala and Scala Sans as designed in 1988 by Martin Majoor for the Vredenburg Concert Hall in Utrecht. The sans and the serif versions are intended to complement each other and have their roots in the humanist typographical tradition of the mid-eighteenth century. It was around this time that the Teatro alla Scala, after which the font is named, was constructed in Italy.