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Mongrel Cities of the 21st Century: In Defense of Multiculturalism[1]

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This paper deals with the power, and the limitations, of an idea. That idea is multiculturalism, although I'm going to suggest another name – interculturalism – to clarify and expand on its evolving meaning. There have been three great animating ideas in the West in the past three centuries. The American revolution gave us 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' and an evolving form of liberal democracy. The French revolution gave us 'liberty, equality and fraternity', and a republican form of democracy. And the Russian revolution gave us socialism: equality, but without democracy. I want to make a very controversial argument. Namely that what I think of as Canada's 'quiet revolution' since the 1970s, and still evolving, has given us a fourth great animating idea for organizing society, namely multiculturalism. This idea is the one that is the most appropriate to the new world social order of the 21st century, a century in which the whole world will, finally, become urban, and in which most of the world's cities, certainly in the West, are what I call 'mongrel': that is, multiethnic, multiracial, hybrid.

Multiculturalism is of course much more than an idea. It's a political philosophy and a great social project, a way of imagining how we might manage to co-exist peaceably in the increasingly culturally diverse shared spaces of streets and neighbourhoods, cities and regions. But the concept is not only controversial, it is not well understood, and has different meanings in different countries, so I will clarify what the idea means at its best, how it has evolved in Canada, and why I think it is **the** idea that is most likely to get us successfully through the challenges of the 21st century and this great Age of Migration which we are experiencing.

The multicultural city/region is seen by some as more of a threat than an opportunity. The threats are perceived as multiple: psychological, economic, religious and cultural. It's a complicated experiencing of fear of 'the other' alongside the fears of losing one's job, fear of a whole way of life being eroded, fear of change itself. In Europe, the emergence of multiethnic cities shatters citizens' self-understanding of national and collective identity – what it means to be Dutch, Danish, German, even British. These fears have produced rising levels of anxiety about and violence against those who are different, who are seen as not belonging, as 'not my people'.

Looking back at the last two decades of the 20th century from the vantage point of the twenty-first, we can see the confluence of several elements: the collapse of communist states; a post-Marxist appreciation of the latent energies in civil society exceeding the unity and power of command economies; an acceleration of population flows accompanying the globalization of economic life, as affluent members of a new managerial class enjoy transnational mobility while impoverished postcolonials migrate to the center of former empires; the eruption of new claims to positive identity among groups whose previous identifications along lines of race, gender, sexuality, religion or disability were experienced as marginalizing and degrading; and the increasing porosity and uncertainty of territorial boundaries and national identities.

These gathering drives to civil society, multiculturalism, the return of the colonial repressed, transnational mobility, and pluralist tolerance in turn encounter their dialectical opposite, a series of aggressive responses that demand a return to a unified faith, race, reason, nation, gender duality or 'normal' sexuality (Connolly 1995). With a little help from the events of September 11th, 2001, real and metaphorical border patrols appear to be tightening in the early years of the 21st century as this battle between the impulse to fundamentalism and the impulse to pluralization and tolerance plays itself out in our cities in complex ways. While fundamentalist terrorists attack what they see as the manifold decadence of the West, there are powerful fundamentalist forces within western nations seeking to purify their own societies of all that is seen as Other or 'unnatural'– feminists and homosexuals, atheists and Muslims, immigrants and multiculturalists.

But there's something else happening in the West, as well. Declining birth rates, an aging population, and depleted social security funds mean that we need the influx of able-bodied men and women to maintain a growing labour force and economy. This demographic and economic reality, combined with the culturally diverse source countries of emigration, is what ensures that the 21st century is, indisputably, the century of multicultural cities and societies, empirically speaking. It will also be the century of struggle for multiculturalism and against fundamentalisms of all kinds – that is, the belief in cultural and/or religious purity. Nobody has expressed this more eloquently than Salman Rushdie, writing in defense (and explanation) of his novel, *The Satanic Verses*.

If *The Satanic Verses* is anything, it is a migrant's eye view of the world. It is written from the very experience of uprooting, disjuncture and metamorphosis (slow or rapid, painful or pleasurable) that is the migrant condition, and from which, I believe, can be derived a metaphor for all humanity. Standing at the center of the novel is a group of characters most of whom are British Muslims… struggling with just the sort of great problems that have arisen to surround the book, problems of hybridization and ghettoization, of reconciling the old and the new. Those who oppose

the novel most vociferously today are of the opinion that intermingling with a different culture will inevitably weaken and ruin their own. I am of the opposite opinion. *The Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. Melange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world… *The Satanic Verses* is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love song to our mongrel selves (Rushdie 1992:394).

This paper is, if you like, a love song to our mongrel cities and to the political philosophy that undergirds their thriving: namely, multiculturalism. So first I want to delve further into the multiple and contested meanings of this philosophy and dwell a little on its evolution in Canada, and on its opponents as well as its supporters. Then I want to move to one of the most culturally diverse neighbourhoods in Vancouver and talk about how this neighbourhood has succeeded in building an intercultural community over the past twenty years of rapid growth and immigration. Here, I think, is a model, at the micro-scale, of the lived experience of this ambitious political philosophy, a model full of relevance for addressing the anxieties that are unsettling European cities at this moment in history. Finally, I return to this animating idea and talk about it as a leap of the imagination, and about the pay-off that comes from making the leap…

An evolving idea and its paradoxical meanings

At the beginning of the last century, Wilfred Laurier's Liberal government both decided that immigration was Canada's destiny, and answered the question of immigration and identity by telling new arrivals: "Let them look to the past, but let them also look to the future: let them look to the land of their ancestors, but let them also look to the land of their children". These words are as inspiring today as they were remarkable then, and they also succinctly capture the tight rope that Canadian multicultural policy has teetered along as it has sought to adjust to new waves of immigration from non-Anglo-European source countries.

Today, worldwide, there is a distinct sense of crisis in the air surrounding multiculturalism, with detractors in the UK, the Netherlands, and elsewhere arguing that it has resulted in a ghettoizing of societies into ethnic silos. While this may have been precisely the intent of the policy in the Netherlands, this was not so in Canada, although there are those who argue that this has been the perhaps unintended effect of multicultural policies. So in recent years there has been a questioning

not only of specific policies but of the very idea itself as a guiding philosophy for the nation. I want to briefly outline these debates and suggest why they necessarily agitate us .

Canadian multiculturalism has served as a guideline for government policy since 1971, and also as a framework for national discourse on the construction of Canadian society: that is, what kind of country we are, and aspire to be. Initially conceived as a way of accommodating separatist impulses in Québec, the policy has had to evolve to take on board, literally, the arrival of increasing numbers of immigrants from 'non-traditional' (non-Anglo-European) countries. This sense of an evolving multiculturalism indicates that it is a *work in progress* rather than a finalized or permanently settled philosophy. I will argue that this is a strength of Canadian multiculturalism rather than a weakness, and that the unsettled nature of the philosophy reflects a productive unsettling of the nation in the face of three decades of increasingly culturally diverse immigration.

Canadian multiculturalism has encouraged individuals to voluntarily associate with the culture and tradition of their choice, essentially declaring as a human right the right to retain one's cultural heritage, not only in private but in public. There has been significant spending, through multicultural grants, to support the maintenance of various cultures and languages and to encourage diverse cultural festivals in public places, as well as the symbolic gesture of public artworks that recognize and celebrate the multiple peoples who make up the nation. This is surely a remarkable change from conventional strategies of nation building, and many immigrants who have arrived in Canada after periods of stay in European countries comment on how much less racism there is here, how much more welcome they feel.

As remarkably harmonious as Canadian society undoubtedly is, and in no small part thanks to multicultural philosophy and policy, there are at least **five significant criticisms** of this philosophy and its associated policies. One comes from indigenous communities who argue that their claims, which go beyond calls for cultural recognition, to demands for land and sovereignty, cannot be addressed within a multicultural political framework. A second critique is aimed at the apparent 'culturalist' assumptions that define immigrants (but rarely the host society) by ethno-cultural markers, focus on ethnicity as a primary identification, ignore differences within, not to mention the evolving nature of any culture, and allegedly encourage ethnic separatism and competition. A third criticism has been that the apparent tolerance expressed in multiculturalism has masked an ongoing and institutionalized racism in Canadian society directed at visible minorities: that the posture of equality upheld by multiculturalism is actually a veil that conceals significant economic and political inequalities (The Vertical Mosaic); and that the gaiety of multicultural festivals is a sedative that dulls

the senses to the continuing marginalization of immigrants from the economic and political mainstream of national life.

I accept all of these as valid and powerful critiques of actually existing multiculturalism. But, they do not tell the full story of what has been achieved, nor do they exhaust what David Ley (2005) has recently called 'the potential reach of multiculturalism', to which I'll return. There's a fourth and even more fundamental critique that I need to mention, because it helps us to understand the necessarily paradoxical nature of multiculturalism. In both Canada and Australia, multiculturalism was introduced by the state as a way of managing increasingly diverse streams of immigration, immigration that was understood as essential for continued economic development of the nation. When a nation state adopts multiculturalism as its guiding philosophy, there is an underlying concern that there's a new problem for the state, a problem that needs managing. If the age of global migrations unsettles the established order of things (notions of belonging, of identity, ways of life taken for granted, thought of as 'normal'), then the state responds either by attempting to restore the old order through repressive and exclusionary policies, or by writing new rules for shaping and managing the new order of things. The new rules re-write some old definitions of belonging and citizenship and create new, different boundaries. Multicultural legislation is an attempt to define, and perhaps to limit, the extent to which the nation will change as a result of immigration. It reflects and addresses a profound unsettling of norms, and fear of change, on the part of the host society, *at the same time as* it appears to celebrate, and perhaps genuinely desires, this change and seeks to move cautiously towards a new national identity.

So, multiculturalism and the associated legislation is at once very pragmatic in its attempt to manage a new situation and simultaneously very idealistic in seeking to create new ways of defining the nation. Further, it is likely to be, and should always be contested, at one extreme by those who wish to see no change to the nation as they understand it, and at the other extreme, by newcomers, as they come to experience exclusion in various ways. In other words, multiculturalism is not an entirely altruistic project, and the language of a virtuous tolerance in which it is couched needs to be constantly challenged by scrutinizing its actual effects in every policy field. Which leads to a fifth and final criticism of actually existing multiculturalism. There is an extraordinary discrepancy between discourses of immigration and multiculturalism on the one hand, and labor market practices on the other. Multicultural rhetoric celebrates the pluralist immigrant society. But the labor market valorizes all things Canadian – Canadian education credentials, Canadian work experience, and Canadian English accents – while devaluing all things and people defined as 'foreign'. Thus the recent report of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, 'Settlement and Integration: A Sense of

Belonging, Feeling at Home' (2003), for example, highlights the common immigrant experience of de-skilling and underemployment and concludes that the stated goals of Canada's immigration policy are being derailed by employment practices.

These five critiques reveal serious shortcomings as well as a dark side to the Canadian experience with implementing multiculturalism. Since the philosophy has been inscribed in legislation and in the Charter, policies across the board need to respond to new mandates. That inevitably takes time, since it requires institutional change, changes in the training of policy makers as well as service providers, and changes in everyday life: how the host society treats newcomers, in stores, on public transport, as neighbors, in a multitude of everyday mundane ways.

So I want to switch now from critique to hope, exploring the idea of multiculturalism as an unfinished and evolving social and political project. What's striking to me since arriving here five years ago as an immigrant myself, is the subtle evolution in the interpretation of the philosophy itself, clearly in response to some of the criticisms noted above. It seems to me that by stealth rather than by any well-publicised debate, Canada's approach to the integration of immigrants in the 21st century has shifted *from a multicultural to an intercultural foundation*, and that the emphasis now is less on funding to preserve immigrants' cultural heritage and more on creating an intercultural civic culture. This does not mean that funding for the preservation of cultural heritage has ceased, but rather that there is a recognition of the *longer term* importance of bridging rather than reinforcing cultural differences.

This is by far the most promising approach to managing our co-existence in the mongrel cities of the 21st century and one that could be a model for other countries. An intercultural perspective, as a normative project, has at least two dimensions: a social imaginary of inventing and learning new ways of living together in all of our differences, and a political project capable of overcoming the weaknesses of 20th century multiculturalism, by constructing a different sense of citizenship and of belonging. I'll briefly outline each of these before moving on to some concluding thoughts.

Interculturalism as a political project recognizes *the right to difference*, expressed as the legitimacy and specific needs of minorities and marginalized groups, but also recognizes the need to contest this right against other rights – human rights, women's rights, gay rights, for example. Where the host culture has already established such rights, accepting them must surely be a required condition of immigrants wishing to join this new political community.

Given that the lived complexities of immigrant integration occur in the city, and usually the larger cities of any nation, some scholars have argued for a notion of urban or local citizenship, understood as the practices through which individuals or groups formulate and claim new rights or struggle to expand or maintain existing rights to the city.

The right to local citizenship is the right of all residents to inhabit and appropriate public space and the right to participate as an equal in public affairs, to be engaged in debating the future of cities and neighbourhoods and creating new intercultural spaces and built forms, and new ways of being together. This involves nothing less than expanding the spaces of democracy through participation at the local level, and a model of democracy that implies no closure: that is, no permanent state of integration and harmony towards which we are working but an always contested engagement with and continually redefined notion of the common good and shared destiny of the citizens of the city. This in turn involves an understanding of politics as 'the construction of the political community in which we desire to live, and this is a permanently unfinished project' (Mouffe 2000).

The cultural embeddedness of human beings seems to be inescapable, and some form of cultural identity and belonging is unavoidable. And yet we are capable of critically evaluating our own culture's beliefs and practices, and of understanding and appreciating, as well criticizing, those of other cultures. We are capable of imagining and desiring cultural change (for example, anti-racism campaigns, the civil rights movement, the feminist movement). At the heart of an intercultural perspective is the belief that no culture is perfect, or can be perfected, and that all cultures have something to learn from and contribute to others. So *intercultural dialogue* is a necessary component of cultural and societal growth and development. Cultures are always evolving, dynamic, and ultimately hybrid. And since diversity exists within as well as between cultures, no pure form of cultural identity is capable of being the foundation of membership in political community. This implies *the end of mainstream*, in politico-cultural terms, and the birth of plurality as the basis of political community.

A sense of belonging in an intercultural society cannot be based on race, religion, ethnicity, or any other such marker of identity/difference. Rather, that sense of belonging must be based on a *shared commitment to a political community*, and specifically to a political community that remains perpetually open to redefinition as its membership changes. But there must be agreed-on procedures for debate and for resolving conflicts, and there must be legal and institutional protections against discrimination. A shared commitment to a political community also requires an *empowered* citizenry,

which in turn means addressing prevailing inequalities of political and economic power as well as developing new stories about and symbols of national and local identity and belonging.

That is a brief outline of the political components of an intercultural project. The social imaginary that must accompany this is expressed in four words, 'how strangers become neighbours': that is, discovering new ways of living together that are not merely tolerant of difference, at a distance, but involve genuine respect for and connection with other cultures, a *being in relation with,* which is only possible at the scale of the neighbourhood.

To explain this, I want to talk very briefly about an exceptional local institution in Vancouver, the Collingwood Neighbourhood House (CNH).

Building a community where none existed

The CNH was established 21 years ago in a neighbourhood undergoing rapid population growth due to immigration from predominantly non-Anglo/European countries. (By 2004 native English speakers comprised a mere 27% of the population). The neighbourhood response to this rapid socio-cultural change was a fairly typical one: some people started locking their doors, and expressing sentiments such as 'what are they doing here' and 'why don't they go back where they came from'. The major catalyst in turning around these fears and anxieties was the CNH, which was founded by local community members with the mission of building a community where none had existed, creating a place for everyone, irrespective of cultural origins or other differences. The Board that governs the place and shapes its programs and services has always been representative of the diversity of the community, and the programs have always been based on an intercultural philosophy. In other words, all programs and services must be open to everyone, rather than catering to specific groups defined by age, ethnicity, religion, and so on.

The CNH now offers hundreds of programs and services, with a staff of 90, 400 volunteers, and a clientele of just over 100,000 users, in a neighbourhood whose population is 45,000. What is so special about this place, to its many users as well as staff and volunteers, is that it creates a sense of welcome and of belonging, it helps people to connect, to move out of their own cultural group or demographic and get to know others. It is referred to by many users and staff as a 'blessed place'. Its model is one of coöperation (rather than competition) with other local agencies and facilities. And its philosophy is that of empowering local residents to shape their own destiny, through working together and building relationships. What strikes me as so compelling about this model is that it works in apparently very prosaic ways. People get to know each other and move out of their cultural

isolation by sharing/taking part in everyday activities such as language classes, child care, recreational and skills-training programs. During these activities they begin to share stories, of their immigration experience, for example, which create bonds across cultures and ages and religions. Intercultural exchanges through children, food, and the arts, seem to provide a non-intimidating initiation into deeper, more long term involvement in the community and the organization. The CNH also provides regular anti-racism education programs and teaches, through its consistent policies and actions, that community is built through inclusion rather than through drawing boundaries. The CNH story is instructive in what it takes to work towards living with diversity, beyond the American model of 'indifference to difference', towards actually building an intercultural community. It is a living, breathing example of the daily and ongoing negotiation of difference through coming together on common projects and in everyday activities of survival and the reproduction of life.

In conclusion: Leaving the shore… a leap of faith

Multiculturalism is a leap of the imagination. From its beginnings, in Canada at least, people had an idea of what a good country could be. The idea involved welcoming rather than shunning strangers, and not requiring them to abandon their own cultures and lifeways in order to become a member of Canadian society. Most people couldn't describe this idea even now in more than fuzzy terms, or by associating it with food and festivals, the ethnic bazaar. There is a huge element of expediency and opportunism in the concept, going back to the 1970s. And it's always been a risk. No-one has ever known for sure, (or knows now), whether a country based on such an idea is really possible, but again and again we leap toward the idea, and hope for the best. And maybe making the leap is the whole point. It's a life-affirming, humanity-affirming project.

But the idea doesn't truly live on the philosopher's page. It lives when it's expressed in acts. And the country doesn't live unless we make the leap from our tribe or focus group or gated community or demographic, and land on the shaky platform of that idea of a good country which all kinds of different people share. And here I'm on the same page as the Hopi Elders who sent out a message in 2001, post- 9/11, as follows:

> There is a river flowing now very fast.
> It is so great and swift
> That there are those who will be afraid.
> They will try to hold on to the shore.
> They will feel they are being torn apart
> And will suffer greatly.

Know that the river has its destination.
The Elders say we must let go of the shore,
Push off into the middle of the river,
Our eyes open and our heads above the water,
And I say, see who is there with you,
And celebrate.

At this time in our history
We are to take nothing personally,
Least of all ourselves,
For the moment we do
Our spiritual growth and journey come to a halt.

The way of the lone wolf is over.
Gather yourselves.
Banish the word struggle from your attitude and vocabulary.
All that we do now
Must be done in a sacred manner and in celebration.

We are the ones we have been waiting for.

When I read this I recall a similarly powerful and prophetic statement from the 1980s by Bernice Reagon, a political theorist and founder/lead singer of the African American a capella group Sweet Honey in the Rock:

We've pretty much come to the end of a time when you can have a
space that is yours only – just for people you want to be there…
We've finished with that kind of isolating. There is no hiding place.
There is nowhere you can go and only be with people who are like
you. It's over. Give it up. (Reagon 1981: 357).

This leap of faith that I'm talking about, or the pushing away from the shore that the Hopi Elders envisage and encourage, is a leap that's made in public, and it's made for free. It's not, in the end, a product or a service (although that's part of it). It's a way of being in the world, of relating. You do it for reasons unexplainable by *economics or patriotism* – the two driving ideas of our time. It's done in public spaces, face to face, where anyone is free to go. It's not done on TV or over the Internet or by phone.

The places you'll see it are on city sidewalks, in school playgrounds, on subways, at bus stops, in public parks, parking lots, sports clubs, queues in stores, at sports events, in high school gyms, child care centres. In those places, and others like them, the leaps that continue to invent and define the intercultural nation continue to be made. When the leap fails, it looks like the destruction of

the Africville community in Halifax in the 1960s, or the appalling history of the residential schools. When the leap succeeds, it looks like the Collingwood Neighbourhood House.

The leap requires physical presence and physical risk: to speak to, smile at, or just even meet the gaze of the stranger, to begin a process of welcoming. The risk, psychologically, is that we might all be, *will be*, changed in some way by this encounter. But the pay-off, in terms of dreams realized, of understanding, of people connecting instead of colliding, can be so glorious as to make the risks seem miniscule.

There's a magic in this idea and the acts that embody it, acts like the creation of the CNH. There's also a public act of courage. And those acts are out there each day along with their opposites. It's a public service to be brave.

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