

2 Shattering the North American Dream —Testimonies and Experiences

Let America be America again.

[...]

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed –

[...]

[where] equality is in the air we breathe.¹

Canadians could be a people who recognize that our country is a state in process rather than a nation with one absolute goal. It could be a state where questioning, ambiguity, privacies, the responsibility both to ourselves and to others, the multicultural dialogue and the shifting of borderlines, are allowed to become habits of mind.²

AS DISCUSSED AT LENGTH IN THE INTRODUCTION, the USA is a country that, “despite its arbitrary frontiers,”

despite its bewildering mix of race and creed, could believe in something called the True America and could invest that patent fiction with all the moral and emotional appeal of a religious symbol.³

The religious, social, and political ideals inscribed in the US Constitution – the idea that ‘all men are created equal’ – and the US motto of ‘life, liberty,

¹ Langston Hughes, “Let America Be America Again” (1935), in Hughes, *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, vol. 1: *The Poems: 1921–1950*, ed. & intro. Arnold Rampersad (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2001): 189, quoted in Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston MA: Little & Brown, 1993): 439.

² B.W. Powe, *A Canada of Light* (1993; Toronto: Somerville House, 1997): 121.

³ Seymour Martin Lipset, “Historical Traditions and National Characteristics,” 154.

and the pursuit of happiness' lie at the heart of the American Dream. While these American ideals suggest the upholding of the rights of the individual, Canada's principles of 'peace, order and good government' imply ideas of control and protection, a role essentially performed by the state itself. Moreover, whereas Canadians often question whether the country has a national identity at all, Americans self-confidently define themselves in terms of their own national history and tradition, a founding myth often referred to as the US creed.

While the ideology of the American Dream is paradigmatic in American national history, the discourse of official multiculturalism in Canada – enshrined in law by the Canadian Multicultural Act of 1988 – has developed into a similar myth of equality and tolerance. The motto 'unity in diversity' implies official acceptance and acknowledgement of different cultures in a pluralistic society. As Linda Hutcheon has noted, since the British North American Act was passed in 1867, Canada has grown from a so-called nation of "two cultural solitudes – the British and the French – the only two groups officially recognized" into a society whose "multiracial, pluri-ethnic nature [...] is an undeniable reality."⁴

Envisioned as a nation where each crisis constitutes a "provisional milestone in the history of a country free of the weight of bloody history and reverent constitutionalism," the "Canadian experiment" has been lauded by critics such as B.W. Powe in his book *A Canada of Light*.⁵ Partly a hymn to Canada's unrealized potential, partly a polemic against the politicians who have betrayed those possibilities, Powe's visionary work of political philosophy dares to re-imagine Canadian national identity. In it, Powe draws a passionately inspired portrait of Canada as a communication state – a counter-nation of loose ties and subtle associations where dialogue, ideas, debate, and the exchange of information are the currency that holds Canadians lightly together. In this sense, *A Canada of Light* points to the urgent realization of a new and liberating way of what it means to be Canadian. Countering George Grant's pessimistic *Lament for a Nation*,⁶ which defined the intellectual

⁴ Linda Hutcheon, "Introduction" to *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions and Interviews*, ed. Linda Hutcheon & Marion Richmond (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991): 2.

⁵ Powe, *A Canada of Light*, 24.

⁶ George Grant, *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism* (1965; Montreal & Kingston, Ontario: McGill-Queen's UP, 2005).