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Changing Identities: Postethnic Literature in Canada

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Throughout Canada's history, the literature of immigrant experience has shaped and reflected Canadian society, including the development of Canada's shifting paradigms of national identity. Literature has consistently played a role in determining the Canadian national identity. It was with the advent of multiculturalism in the early 1970s, however, that immigrant contributions to the shaping of the national culture began to receive greater acknowledgement. Many, if not most, Canadians identify multiculturalism as Canada's defining cultural characteristic; Canada's "multicultural literature" has been key in both reflecting and shaping this national sense of self-understanding.

In recent years, however, the Canadian model of multiculturalism has been increasingly subjected to criticism, from various perspectives. It would seem that although the social reality of ethnic pluralism in Canada has not changed, the willingness to retain multiculturalism as a model of Canadian society has. The literary dimensions of this perceived shift will provide the focus of our course.

In this course, we will investigate the extent to which literary depictions of immigrant and "ethnic" experience are heralding a further, yet to be acknowledged, evolution in Canada's national identity. We will explore whether Canadian literature is not in fact signalling a national transformation from a "multicultural" to a "postethnic" society. To probe this possibility, we will examine a range of texts for evidence of forms and categories of identification. We will discuss the degree to which the fixed categories of "belonging" validated by multiculturalism—such as nation, race and ethnicity—are being supplanted by the more fluid notions of "affiliation" and "association" attendant to sexuality, professional status, educational attainment, personal politics and self identification. In brief, we will discuss the ways in which selected texts of Canadian literature treat issues of "identity" and "belonging" at the individual and communal level and what that portends for the national identity.