This chapter reflects on the potential impact United States of America (US) cultural imperialism has on Canadian multiculturalism through teacher education programs, and it aims to contribute to the process of deliberation on non-Canadian content in university courses that shape pre-service teachers’ comprehension of Section Twenty-seven (27) of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, commonly referred to as the “Multiculturalism Act”. Exploratory in nature, it includes personal history, along with a modest foray into examining contents of Canadian university classes. Additionally, it marks what is hoped to become a more dedicated examination on the use of US sources within our teacher preparation courses that involve multiculturalism, while acknowledging that these influences are difficult to avoid given US/Canadian history and proximity. Addressing this relationship at the Press Club in Washington in 1969, Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau likened living next to the US to a mouse sleeping with an elephant. He observed, “No matter how friendly and even-tempered is the beast, if I can call it that, one is affected by every twitch and grunt”.

Like many Canadians, I am fascinated yet suspicious about the elephant to the south, and I’m also deeply aware that the elephant is not really that concerned by the Canadian mouse (Myers & Myers, 1985). From ideas (e.g., intellectual) and art (e.g., media) to produce (e.g., food) and product (e.g., cars) I am a guilt-ridden consumer of US goods. However deeply apprehensive of the manner in which all of this affects my adopted country, I still buy. At the same time, I fear the manner in which Canada is shaped by the lopsided elephant/mouse relationship, especially as relates to multiculturalism, an ideal under increased attack. Recent events of the US presidential election of Donald Trump do little to dissuade this stress of the elephant’s actions, with Canadian novelist and columnist Marche observing shortly after the successful use of a xenophobic campaign that, “(w)e are the last country on earth to believe in multiculturalism” (2016, p. 5). Given the nature of sleeping next to an elephant, this places multiculturalism in a precarious position and requires greater attentiveness on the part of all who value its potential.
As a professor of Education, I am dedicated to the ever-evolving possibilities of an inclusive multicultural society, an ideal often purported as being a highly valued part of Canadian identity (Dewing, 2009). Like other Canadians, my own history has shaped my views of multiculturalism. As a non-Christian, visible minority, immigrant who grew up in Quebec, Canada, one who experienced discrimination on an all too regular basis and only became a Canadian citizen in my late twenties, my position rests equally on multiculturalism’s possibilities for inclusiveness, while acknowledging its persuasive critics (Bissoondith, 1994). As an educator whose work experience spans from daycare to university within a country that entrenches the concept of multiculturalism within its very laws, my expectations are that these principles of inclusiveness must be fostered through schools.

Schools are also one of the prime locations where theories of identity formation come to life and, in Canada, that identity still includes multiculturalism. In identity formation, whether it is individual or group, there is the need for a point of comparison: an “I” compared to “you”; an “us” and not “them”; a “self” versus “Other” (Said, 1978). Many conclude that the Canadian national identity develops from its need to differentiate itself “…from other nations, specifically the United States” (Mackey, 2002, p. 13), ironically the very country that both overwhelms and ignores it (Myers & Myers, 1985).

Given the combination of expectations and anxieties, I cannot help but ask, when it comes to multiculturalism, to what extent has the US elephant twitched and grunted in its sleep, and perhaps even inadvertently rolled over, moulded, and even smothered one of the Canadian mouse’s defining characteristics of being multicultural? Are our ideas, either past or present, of what a multicultural Canada means threatened by sleeping next to an elephant?

Shohat and Stam (1994) state that multiculturalism is “(n)ever a single entity”, having different interpretations based on differing contextual origins. Whereas in the US, multiculturalism emerged against a backdrop of conquest, slavery, segregation, Manifest Destiny, the Cold War, Civil Rights, and US imperialism…, in Canada, it emerged against the backdrop of aboriginal dispossession, Anglo-French biculturalism, and the Canadian Multiculturalism Act in 1988. (p. 389)

If our roots regarding multiculturalism did emerge differently at the outset, can we now differentiate between a Canadian and an American view? In an era when Western democracies are falling to a “…tidal onslaught of xenophobia” (Marche, 2016, p. 1), can Canada resist this trend, given that we also must accept that our educational curricular practices have traditionally been informed by the US (Clark, 2004)? The first step in beginning the conversation of US influence on pre-service teacher curriculum on multiculturalism involves examining relevant university courses.