Like Umberto Eco, M. G. Vassanji straddles the line between fiction and nonfiction, and both have an interest in scientific precision, Eco in semiotics and Vassanji in his training as a scientist. The border between fiction and nonfiction in both their work is not always clear. In this chapter, I could discuss the same matter in Vassanji, but I would rather concentrate on his lesser-known work. His fiction tends, like Eco’s, to be best known to readers, but, unlike Eco, Vassanji has not made a career in the study of language, literature and philosophy. Both share an interest in journalism, and I will discuss briefly Vassanji’s journalism just as I did Eco’s. Both are public figures engaged with the world.

Their fiction is, in that sense, worldly, but so is the urge to write for the newspapers and reach another audience that might not read that fiction. My book discusses language and place and examines the strategies of texts that proclaim their truth or are fictions in poems, plays and novels. Vassanji has lived in Tanzania, the United States and Canada for long periods, so it is only by choice or our need to designate that we might call him a Canadian writer, either his choice or ours. In this world, it can be tedious to try to categorize thus. Here is a writer who can teach us about what it is to be human. He can also shed some light on South Asia, Africa and North America and particular cultures and states within them. In Zurara and Ralegh, we might have observed what is at stake in a human life, whether being an African who suffered to have his or her family broken up and sold into slavery or an Englishman at court or in prison awaiting death, and at the end of the body of the book, we see what Obama says of his own life and the life of those still taken in slavery. This writing may partly be private, but it is in the public space between the writer and the reader. That is especially true of journalism and of best-sellers as Eco, Vassanji and
Obama would well know. Some of what follows is work in which Vassanji would reach a limited audience and some of it a very large one indeed, like the article in *Maclean’s* magazine.

The trying trials of essays and how they represent life is what this chapter concentrates on in the work of M. G. Vassanji. He is known more for his fiction and more recently his memoirs on India. Montaigne helped to shape the modern Western essay, and it has within it a latitude and scope that allow for exploration and suggestion rather than exhaustion. In this spirit, I will explore aspects of Vassanji’s essays on Canada, the postcolonial and Tanzania as they relate to his life and work. The last essay is a magazine article, and is part of the tradition of “journalism” or prose controversy in English that writers like Thomas Nashe, Shakespeare’s contemporary, helped to forge. This, then, is an examination of Vassanji’s brief nonfiction, and my hope is that it will put into perspective some of his other longer and better known works, especially his fiction. As these nonfictional texts are not as well known as the fiction, I will discuss them chronologically, and in some detail, trying to give a sense of the contours of these works. In one case especially, “I was a city boy, a soft Asian,” I shall examine Vassanji’s textual strategies fully.

**South-Asia, America, Canada**

Vassanji’s Introduction to a volume on this subject, begins with a quotation from Lionel Trilling that represents culture as a struggle. Moreover, Vassanji supplements and amplifies this struggle by telling the story of the separation of Ved Mehta’s father from his father and Ved’s grandfather, who had asked his son to read his letter, when he had left the Indian Ocean en route to New York. Lalaji has written, in his elegant Urdu hand, “Most of my life is behind me, and provided I live, we shall meet. But, as we say in our beloved Punjab, Even the meeting of rivulets is a matter of Kismet.” Presumably, this quotation provides the idea for the title of the collection: *A Meeting of Streams: South Asian Canadian Literature*. Here is the voice of the grandfather that lives through the inner voice of the script. Ved’s father, Daddyji, returned home, but only after Lalaji had died of pneumonia. This is the tragic separation of travel and distance: people in families go their separate ways. Ved later settled overseas despite his father not being able to be there at his father’s death. This story becomes, for Vassanji, a parable for the settlement of South Asians in Canada and the West. The Old World continues to come to the New World, and those from former parts of the British empire move to other former constituent colonies like Canada.