

## Grace MacInnis Lecture

—Myrna Kostash

*The Edmonton based author Myrna Kostash was the Grace MacInnis Visiting Scholar in the Spring of 2002. The following is a transcript of the lecture she delivered to faculty, students and the public at Simon Fraser University, Burnaby Campus on March 14, 2002.*

Americans made me a writer. First it was the Chicago Seven. In the winter of 1970 I was sitting in a living room in a country house in England, chugging beer with some ex-pat Canadians, and watching the BBC television dramatization of the (infamous) Trial of the Chicago Seven. The Seven were NQW Left radicals apprehended in the wake of the riots of 1968, police riots, against the demonstrators gathered in Chicago for the Democratic party convention in the hot, very hot, summer of Vietnam.

I had been living in England, writing no-account short stories that were rejected, one by one, by British magazines. Impasse.

But at the conclusion of the BBC drama I heaved myself out of my chair, tore up the stairs to my room and wrote in a feverish ejaculation what was to be my first published piece of prose—an example of the ‘gonzo journalism’ that I had been assimilating from the pages of *Rolling Stone* magazine for years.

It was published in *Saturday Night* magazine, then under the editorship of Robert Fulford, when it was remarkably sympathetic to the New Journalism pouring forth from the pens of my generation. The article’s lacklustre title—“Canada’s No Place To Be A Guerrilla”—belied the burden of its message, which was brash (and I quote myself): “Watching Chicago and paying attention to my reactions proved something to me. Young Americans have been called up and we [Canadians] haven’t. It’s their show, baby, and we are the peanut gallery. Which is what makes Hoffman, Rubin, Hayden et al. [members of the Chicago Seven] as our culture heroes a bit disquieting. For both of us. For them, because they don’t need any well-meaning innocents mucking about with issues of real blood and guts. For us, because flashing the peace sign and yelling hooray from the safe side of the forty-ninth parallel is only a prop for our chagrin that we don’t have a revolution of our own to die for.” I never wrote fiction again. I was on to something else. In that Buckinghamshire cottage I had had an insightful flash not only of the urgency of the events of my own time but also of the rhetoric with which to engage them as a writer.

In the spring of 1972, back in Canada, I boarded a

Photo by Donald Grayston



*Roy Miki, Professor Emeritus, Department of English, SFU, Myrna Kostash and Jerry Zaslove, Director Emeritus, Institute for the Humanities, SFU.*

Greyhound bus in Toronto and nervously made my way across the border, headed for the annual convention of SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] in Boston. I had been a member of SDS for one bucolic year in Seattle in 1965–66 and so the decision to attend the conference was based both on nostalgia for the Golden Age of student activism in North America and on my journalist’s instincts that herein lay a story. (I even got the go-ahead from *Rolling Stone* magazine to cover it but the thirty-one page report I produced was never published.)

I roamed through the conference as if I were saying beads: at the end of a thousand Marxist-Leninist *aves* I would know what I had to do. The borderlessness between Canadian and American desire of the 1960s political generation was only intensified by the extravagance of American events, especially of war, and the privileged positioning of their television and print images throughout the world. 1972: the *Drug Abuse* posters and the *Peace is Hell, Hire a Veteran* posters and *Vandalism is Dangerous* posters staring down at me anytime I rode the subway—folkways of grief. And the newspaper items about the messed-up schools, the riot at Walpole prison, the Puerto Rican packing it in and going back home for a modicum of freedom from terror, the warnings from my friends to keep my doors locked, rumours of corruption and blackmail, forced sterilization and mutilation, not to mention the end of the world.

When I first read SDS’s founding document, *The Port Huron Statement*, in 1964, I had felt no disjuncture as subject: the SDS ‘we’ was inclusive if only because America had supplied all the content. “If we appear to seek the unattainable,” they wrote of their social movement, “then let it be known that we do so to avoid the unimaginable.” I knew exactly what SDS were talking about: the “unattainable” was justice in Mississippi and Harlem, and an end to the war in Vietnam; the “unimaginable” was nuclear incineration

in New York and Moscow. I read myself into these scenarios and felt included.

When I reread *The Port Huron Statement* in 1972, I was still inside that ‘we’ but rather nostalgically, as though I had already begun to separate. I wrote of the almost ‘unbearable’ moral sweetness, political chastity and intellectual sobriety of that early 1960s vision of SDS and of my own now aggrieved longing for that tribal past when the visions of the City of Man, all justice and peace, safety and enlightenment, could still move us to tears, when we could still insist that the future of people already lay full-formed within our imaginations... Look at the nouns: community, participatory democracy, love, self-determination; the verbs: to organize, to labor, to analyze, to confront... If we had known then what was going to happen to us—assassination and war, Black Panthers and Hell’s Angels, overdoses and freak-outs, Jim Morrison and Kate Millett—we would have turned to salt.

But all these years later I see that something else was also about to happen. I was on the cusp of becoming a Canadian nationalist, as though I sensed already that people who would name themselves as ‘Canadians’ would have to locate themselves elsewhere. I wrote:

All that time that we had been gazing in wonder at the American spectacle, mouthing platitudes about our innocence, the war had been creeping up on us. The FLQ covering its tracks street to street, fishermen starving a little more each generation in Nova Scotia and women beating off strike-breakers, Indians dying under car wheels on the highway... A nation of disparate communities scattering in every direction with one or two lonely groups of national liberationists yelling after them: Hang in! Our struggle is collective. Our enemy is the same. The United States is eating us up for dessert. Death to General Motors!

In Boston, at the SDS convention, I stepped right into a crisis of authenticity.

The agenda of the first day was, in fact, set aside so 500 conventioners could join a mass march through Cambridge, across the Charles River and onto the

campus of Boston University. We were showing our solidarity with students there who had been protesting all week against a university administration snarled in an escalating series of miscalculations that had begun with the arrival of Marine Corps recruiters on campus. Initially, I felt right at home and marched along, and felt that old excitement at seeing just how many of us were stretched out along the street. But in my notes I recorded that I was sufficiently unmoved by the collective cheers—“Students! Workers! Black and White! Men! Women! Unite! Fight!” and “Hitler Rose, Hitler Fell, Racist Teachers Go To Hell!”—that I felt “rather too old for this sort of thing” (which is how I explained my discomfort at the time).

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“When I was 18 they told me this would happen.”

I felt an accumulating certainty that, alienated from the passions agitating the people around me, I was a *poseur*, a fake. I interpreted this at the time as class guilt—a kind of moral dyspepsia in considering my life in neo-Leninist terms as petit bourgeois revisionist, class enemy of the proletariat. How long would it take the janissaries of SDS to sniff me out?

I was running the risk of being unmasked in front of the Yankee revolutionaries, but unmasked as what? There was also by 1972 a pointed ambivalence in my feelings about the meaning of American revolution wherein envy and resentment were masked as derision. I wandered around in a jaundiced mood, pretending insouciance when

in fact struggling with a newly emerging point of view—that of the outsider who, having imaginatively stepped outside the American patriotic myth, discovers the ‘we’ no longer includes her.

Here was an emerging struggle with a rhetoric and gestures that were not exactly foreign to me but which had come to me as a kind of second language. What then was my mother tongue? As I sat down to describe these American ‘others’ in 1972, a gently derisive tone took over, what I think of now as the “nudge nudge, wink wink” of the incipient Canadian patriot who finally finds her opportunity in the botches of the international New Left.

The newspapers and arguments. *The Bulletin*, *Challenge*, *Worker’s World*, *Young Socialist*, *Canadian Worker*. Are unions tools of capitalism? Is deferential hiring prejudicial to the white worker? Is Mao a running dog of the imperialists? Is it the Progressive Labor or the Young Socialist Alliance that is revisionist? Or somebody else? Are national liberation and women’s liberation movements petit bourgeois? If they are, does it matter? Who exactly is the working class? Are you? What do you want to know?

Feeling less and less like a participant and more and more like a foreign correspondent, I ran around with my notebook recording the various lunacies of the American scene—for instance, this communication from Youth Supporters of Hammer and Steel and the Republic of New Africa:

Plans for the genocide of the Afro-American people on a massive scale are now being made. In the meantime, white workers and imperialists are collaborating in world domination, SDS is collaborating with Nixon and anti-racists are collaborating with anti-national liberationists.

Finally, in recording a series of resolutions that had come spewing out of convention workshops, on welfare, racism in the army, IQ tests, abortion, class struggle in Québec, political strategy, black nationalism, I simply just let the whole thing go.

So many of us had already tried and lost, tried and faded away, in earlier experiments, from the failure to plug our private zombie's wires into the supershow of International Capitalist Imperialism as it moved glacially over all our puny gestures of scornful rebellion. "Hey," we said, "you can't do that," as it rolled right on over us.

And so I snuck out of America before I could be thrown out, fleeing the disapproval of internationalist 'heavies' (read: Americans) who had tried to sell me pamphlets on American imperialism in Borneo and recruit me to the apocalypse raging in the belly of the Beast. I was hard on my generation about this. After all, I had already written that we Canadians had been committed to the idea of the revolution in America only after the event, flashing the peace sign and yelling "hooray!" from the "safe side of the forty-ninth parallel," propping up our chagrin that we didn't have a "revolution of our own to sign up for."

Fortunately, there was a revolution—several, actually—all emerging from the fragmentation of the international New Left project. But in 1972 the future was still to be constructed. In fact, it felt like a gamble, this choosing of a Canadian contingency over the 'actually existing' American. But there was also the chance that the collective experience of the thin stream of people flung across the country, their encounters with the Sasquatch and the Redcoats, their hockey teams and guitar players, their Québécois charladies making bombs in the basement, would count for something the day we made our getaway from General Motors.

American Sixties culture, its politics and values, had been part of our revealed lives for so long that, had I not had the alternative of that other great adventure, the uncovering of the secret life of my generation in Canada, I might have collapsed then and there, on the bus back to Toronto, from atomization. Instead, I became a Canadian writer.

In 1980 I wrote *Long Way From Home: The Story of the Sixties Generation in Canada*. It was my second book. I wrote

in my concluding chapter, citing a SUPA newsletter of 1966, that "the base of a Canadian oppositional movement is not in a civil rights campaign, or in arguments with liberalism, or in an anti-war movement [all of which describe early SDS] but in the popular nationalism of Canada and Québec and in a participatory democratic movement in the schools and universities. In such a supposition, still so tentative and suggestive, one can hear the creakings of the Americanized stage flats as they shoved aside to reveal the scenario of Canada. After all, the struggle to be in Canada is ongoing, is proceeding every day... To say that the movement was 'imported' is to demean the consciousness Canadians have had all along, however muted or mystified at times, that they live in a place of their own making."

In 1980 the 'sixties generation' was already feeling embattled by the political successes of Margaret Thatcher and by the rhetorical onslaught of the New Right, and I personally felt the painful loneliness of the Canadian writer abused by politically hostile book reviewers and ignored by the Left upon the publication of my book. But this was as nothing compared to the loneliness of the night of the 1988 federal election. By 8:00 pm in Edmonton, our feminist socialist Ukrainian-Canadian NDP candidate was already losing to the Progressive Conservative candidate in Edmonton Strathcona; not that it mattered, Mulroney's Tories having been returned to power even before all the votes were in from the west. Every voting Canadian knew what that meant: the imminent signing of the Free Trade Agreement with the US. I felt that my country—that "place of our own making"—had been kidnapped by forces hostile to my desires as a Canadian citizen.

By these forces it did not mean Americans, at least not in that instance; no, my despair reflected the unspeakable loneliness of the citizen betrayed by her own people: Tories and their supporters, on the farms and at the universities as well as in corporate boardrooms who preferred to hook up with a greedy and

violent empire, reformulating the old continentalist wet dream of 'merging' with Americans, rather than struggle for Canadian sovereignty, however perplexed a project that may be. Now I had to adjust my sense of country, home and citizenship to the very narrow place that still felt like 'mine', not 'theirs'. The place was no longer nation-wide, for I had been evicted from there, but as wide as my everyday work, my neighbourhood, my good and trustworthy friends. That seemed a very constricted space after the exuberance of the New Left and counterculture but I hoped that, in retrospect, one day this period of our defeat would represent the beginning of a new politics of the left or at least a culture of resistance rather than the end of them, at a time when the centre did not hold.

Of course, the very notion of a 'centre' was also under aggressive scrutiny. When I moved to Toronto in 1993 to take up the chairmanship of The Writers Union of Canada, I had an agenda for my term. It included the desire to intervene as a white ethnic in the on-going discussion among artists about race and racialization. But friends, looking on me pityingly as a *naïf* from Alberta, dissuaded me from such a rash act. "If you stand up in a forum in Toronto to speak as a white person, you will be told to sit down. People of colour will accuse you of 'colonising' their space." I felt



**"THE SWORD IS DRAWN  
THE NAVY UPHOLDS IT!"**

chastened, and sat down.

This was uncharacteristic behaviour for me. Ever since publication of my first book, *All of Baba's Children*, in 1978, I had acted as a kind of spokesperson in western Canada for the idea of ethnicity as a generative identity—well past the immigrant experience—that forms part of a broad “culture of resistance” in Canada to Coca-Colonization. This was very exciting stuff for me—it felt like the leading edge of the cultural debate—and I imagined broader and broader Common Fronts of cultural subversives (feminists, immigrants, eco-guerrillas, Métis, artists, gays and lesbians) challenging the globalization of culture. Then suddenly (so it seemed to me) I felt chastened. What had happened? What had happened, of course, was the articulation of a whole view in our discussions around culture and identity: the articulation of race and colour. It wasn't that we ‘ethnics’ had never heard or discussed race and colour in the speech around multiculturalism; it's that we had subsumed them within the familiar categories of ‘otherness’, ‘assimilation’, ‘community’, and of course ‘ethnicity’.

In 1983, the year of the first Women and Words conference in Vancouver, Lillian Allen, Kristjan Gunnars and I could still be on the same panel discussing the relationship among ethnicity, feminism and our writing, as though the one thing we had in common—that none of us was ‘Anglo’—was the most meaningful. The ‘politics of difference’ soon enough overtook that moment of togetherness, and I realized that, just as feminism's ideal of gender solidarity (Sisterhood is Powerful!) had had to yield to the analysis of historical and cultural and class cleavages among women (“Is Lady Astor oppressed by her chauffeur?”), so too did multiculturalism's ideal of unity among minorities have to yield to specifics of race and colour. In a word, I had discovered that, in the new terms of the discourse, I was white. I was a member of a privileged majority. I was part of the problem, not the solution. It was a shock.

As speech on multiculturalism shifted

away from ethnicity and toward race it also shifted in large part from the story of the third generation to the story of immigrants once again. At a conference in Ottawa in 1994 about writers and multiculturalism, Robert Kroetsch and I both felt a pang of nostalgia for the conversations in the 1970s in Edmonton and Saskatoon and Winnipeg which had assumed a collective ‘prairie’ project of “telling our own stories for the very first time.” We could talk with such assurance only because we felt secure and rooted in our place. We were no longer immigrants; we had a Canadian memory. But now we shared artistic space with immigrants who speak English, and with First Nations artists who, in the words of an audience member at the Ottawa conference, “do not belong to the literature of the Settler State [that's Kroetsch and me!] but to the North American landscape.”

We were offered a choice: either this was a problem—a dismemberment of a mythic past of wholeness and togetherness—or this was an opportunity for new cultural forms to emerge from new multicultural practice. After all, the emerging generation of writers among the racial minorities and First Nations were standing on the accumulated experience of Canadian society as a whole, of bilingualism, official multiculturalism, feminism, regionalism, sovereignty-association, Native self-government, gay and lesbian activism, and all the other ideas that have played their part in the negotiations among Canadians about the values and principles of civil society. Which is a way of saying that I got over my shock of no longer being the subject of multiculturalism but only one of its subjects and not necessarily even the most interesting one.

## II.

In the spring of 1997, as part of my job as writer-in-residence at the Regina Public Library, I found myself standing in front of an early morning English class of high school students, telling stories about Margaret Laurence, the War Measures Act, and the National Hockey

League. In the middle of my anecdote, I could see from the baffled expressions on the students' faces that I had finally arrived at that middle-aged moment when I could no longer assume that I and my audiences drew from the same ‘memory bank’. A whole new generation had arrived whose memories went as far back as, perhaps, 1970. In the case of the grade ten class, no further back than about 1987.

It was a classic generational gap, I thought. On one side there I stood, talking about Paul Henderson's ‘legendary’ goal in a twenty-five year old hockey game, on the other side stood the ranks of the next Canadians—according to the 1996 national census, there were 4,557,233 Canadians between the ages of 25 and 35—for whom the world of free trade agreements, electronic communication, educational cutbacks and corporate logos in washroom stalls was utterly normal. I could choose to react to this psychocultural gap in one of two ways. I could join the chorus of my peers who were widely deploring the social and cultural ‘deCanadianization’ of the post-FTA era, and with it the apparent loss of historical memory and social cohesiveness that had still characterized the last truly ‘Canadian’ generation, namely my own. Or I could make an expedition out into the terrain of the next Canada to see if our pessimism and defeatism were justified.

How would their Canadian imagination have been formed, the ‘next Canadians’, for whom everyday politics had been articulated by Brian Mulroney, Jean Chrétien, and Bill Clinton; Canadian culture by Céline Dion singing at the Oscars and guys in suits playing a game of shinney in a beer ad? As I surveyed this terrain, I thought I saw what Douglas Coupland, in *Polaroids from the Dead*, called the “denarration” of his generation, the personal “storylessness” of a generation whose narratives of experience had been dissolved in borderless, denationalized media, and whose continuity with familial, class and cultural memory had been broken, along with the communities that had transmitted them.