

Canada Day 2000

—Myrna Kostash

Excerpt from an article written for The Globe and Mail

Here, in my sister's and brother-in-law's Lanark County home, west of Ottawa, I sit on the borderline between an ancient limestone plain and the rugged Precambrian rock outcrops of the Canadian Shield. Could there be a more Canadian place than this? I feel the literal bedrock of a Canadian self, here where the old stories of First Nations and founding nations, stamped by a red maple leaf that does not even grow on most of Canada's land mass, were first circulated in my schoolgirl's brain. The stories were then rounded out by the satisfying tale of adventure of Galician pioneers in sheepskin coats who broke sod on the great plains and threshed wheat from its upturned emptiness. Finally, the tales conclude in the collective triumph of Expo 67, the World's Fair, just in time for the exhilarating production of Canadian Culture in arts and letters, not to mention in fervent anti-Americanism during the rage that was the war in Vietnam. Where is here? literary theorist Northrop Frye had famously challenged us, and we had answered, Why, it's right here under our feet, this bedrock, these plains, these stories we tell each other. "Here" even has its own flag.

Thirty years later, a young art student from Winnipeg went to Montreal and visited the site of Expo 67, about which he had heard so much from his parents. He took his camera. But the amusement park was closed, and, when he walked to the top of a small hill to look around at the buildings he had become familiar with from photographs, he saw only grey polygons hunkered down among seedy fun park structures, a casino,

and the ruined hulk of the Canada Pavilion, poorly built on a wooden frame and now become ramshackle. The student thought he saw a group of squatters in residence, a sign of some sort of life.

What had happened between these two Expos?

One evening in November 1988 I had sat stunned in a university cafeteria festooned with the brave balloons that were meant to celebrate the victory of

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my NDP candidate from Edmonton Strathcona in the federal election that brought instead the re-election of Brian Mulroney's Tories and the promise of a free trade agreement with the United States.

I was inconsolable. I felt that my country had been kidnapped by aliens, and I didn't mean the Americans. I meant my fellow Canadians who had dreamed the familiar dream of the continentalists in which we Canadians merge with Americans and do away with the travail required to construct our own collective. The place I could still call home was no longer nation-wide but only as wide as my neighbourhood of kindred spirits and peers who widely deplored the social and cultural

deCanadianization of the FTA era, its careless disregard of historical memory and social solidarity. It didn't occur to me that for another, younger, generation, this constricted, mean-spirited, corporatized Canada with a website for an address would be the only home they knew, and that they would love it anyway.

"There is something in the ponderous stillness of these forests..." wrote an early Irish settler in Lanark County, "something in their wild, torn, mossy darkness." That vivid apprehension of a primeval, foundational Canada was gone, it seemed to me, not only in the accelerated clear-cutting of forest—half the timber that has been cut in Canada has been logged in the last 25 years—but also in the imagined notion of the wilderness in which we pretend to be communing with the wild in our semi-natural parks and cedar-clad chalets of ski resorts. The idea of a wilderness has become at least as important to our sense of well-being as the existence of the actual forest itself. And our artists dream of walking out

of our cities, out the back alleys and straight into the boreal forest and the caribou and the Northern Lights, even while most Canadians live in cities, emigrants away from the territorial hinterland that had once borne the meaning of "here."

Of course, for aboriginal Canadians at least, roots go so deep they cannot be pulled, as a Mi'kmaq saying goes, and their artists believe they work around a centre that does not shift with a historical memory that remembers nothing older than Turtle Island itself—"here" has never been elsewhere. Are non-aboriginal Canadians condemned to be provisional dwellers of a homeplace we are not native to or can we somehow reel ourselves into the time before time of aboriginal

memory? I mean, where else would we feel at home?

But these questions, I soon learned from the “next Canadians” as I met them, were not the interesting ones. Yes, there are the ones who do struggle for the actual forests but there are many who see themselves as urban environmental activists—reclaiming the streets for bicycles, say—or, more symbolically, as sharing metaphorical landscapes of communication among media or who insist that “here” is not a geohistorical place, as it was until the Free Trade Agreement for my generation, but a series of stories they tell each other. A young DJ in Toronto, an aficionada of techno-urban music, even found that in the subdivided world of free-floating musical categories, the culture is about “people telling their own stories, bringing people together” as though huddled around some digitized version of the campfire in the Canadian woods. And a Cree-speaking computer artist in Regina believes that the World Wide Web speaks the “Language of Spiders” and allows for the incorporation of the new technology’s powers into the “living skins” of ancestral culture.

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imperfectly with the older, fixed boundary of a historical Canada. Where my generation experienced the perennial Canadian identity crisis as a neurosis to be cured by specific policy decisions to firm ourselves up, younger people talked of the “crisis” as an opportunity to develop a whole series of morphed identities. “Are we a techno-culture, an art, a social community, or a political space?” one wanted to know, relishing the possibilities of all at once. Some even rhapsodize the proliferation of virtual cultures that free the participant of the encumbrances of race and ethnicity, not to mention citizenship, the implications of which seem to me staggering. If identity as historically grounded in collective shared experience in a common space is declared obsolescent, then we are only here now and nothing has happened to us.

And so my young art student in Winnipeg believed it: “I’ve thought that the ultimate postmodern nation would not be based on geography but on a system of networks,” he said, dreamily.

He had told me that his generation of artists was up to something vastly more interesting than the “boring aesthetics” of the modernist suburbia to which so many of his peers had been consigned at birth. Video art, reproducible in endless multiples, excited him. So did images ripped

off underground films and circulated on computers. And leaflets copied in their hundreds at the local copy shop and distributed anonymously. And Polaroids. You even can use Polaroids. “Friends of mine have left Polaroids around the city as some kind of statement: I was here.”

I was here. The idea of those three words, metaphorically scratched onto fading Kodachrome and abandoned to the urban drift, haunted me for a long time—the pathos of the unnamed I, of the no-fixed address of here. But I needn’t feel so sorry. Even the art student feels a little wistful about the older generation’s experience of the old solidarities and certainties, the One Big Narratives of time and place, the old patriotism of the Canadian Shield and Aurora Borealis, of the tales of Manawaka and Batoche and Expo 67, even though he knows that being Canadian now means “celebrating” doubt, inconclusiveness, fluidity and improvisation. It was a dictum of Marshall McLuhan that Canada is the only country in the world that knows how to live without an identity. Knowing there is no “here” anymore on which to make a fixed, convinced and dedicated stance may make of the art student a more unassailable Canadian than he, or I, dreamed possible.

