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Canadians are Canadians not just because we share a past; we are a community across time, across generations. And today, from my boomer point of view, we are at a generational watershed. The people I consider to be the "next" Canadians, those between 25 and 35 years of age, have not been imprinted by the things that mark my middle-aged generation, things like Expo '67 or Trudeaumania or The Guess Who. The gap between us in some ways is so big that I wonder, do these overlapping generations even live in the same country?

Young Canadians are at home with a shrunken welfare state, precarious employment, and food banks; at home with market positioning, venture capital, stock options. Think of their literacy with video text, bandwidth, browser battles, robotics. Not to mention the cell phones ringing in the pockets of those masked Quebec City protesters, armed with teddy bears in sling shots.

But from where I sit, these young Canadians live in a shrinking public sphere in which citizens have been turned into stakeholders driven only by private interest. In this claustrophobic world, university campuses sign exclusive deals with Coca-Cola or PepsiCo, and the 500-channel universe of "personal consumption choices" delivers us to Disney, AOL Time-Warner and Viacom. Members of this generation are thrusting themselves into their future with the tools they have at hand. The techno-realists among them, seeing that the old loyalties of family, neighborhood and workplace have been broken up by the impact of post-industrialism, claim community in cyberspace with e-conferencing, discussion forums, interactive artworks. Ana Serrano, director of MediaLinx H@bitat, a media training facility at the Canadian Film Centre in Toronto, spoke to me hopefully of the reconstruction, in "virtual community," of people's deteriorating actual community, urban and exurban.

The post-FTA generation has been weaned on the language of deficits, downsizing, privatizing, of brand names celebrated as culture, governments denounced as "in our face," borders declared irrelevant. For them, "Here" is not a geohistorical place, as it was for my generation, but a landscape of communications. "I've thought that the ultimate postmodern nation would not be based on geography," young Winnipeg art critic Kevin Matthews told me dreamily, "but on a system of networks." These younger citizens cohabit in micro- and sub-cultures of style, gender, and ethnicity, and for them the perennial Canadian identity crisis is an opportunity to develop a whole series of morphed identities. Are Canadians a techno-culture, an art, a wired community, or a political space? We are invited to relish all the possibilities at once.

Yet I recall Erin Clarke, a young computer programmer in Toronto, who told

me almost wistfully that her generation has a "cultural hunger" for rootedness, as though there were something unbearably shallow and lonely-making about the new world of borderless communication. I remember meeting Paul Tartaglio, a Starbuck's barista in Vancouver, who said that being a Canadian means more than just the "almighty dollar. We have to work together to get things done." In his case, that meant joining the Canadian Auto Workers union and fighting for his interests in the real, not Virtual, workplace.

People want a language that speaks not just of economics but of what American social critic Jeremy Rifkin calls empathy and culture. Just by massing in a common cause, the protesters at the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City evoked a shared desire for an alternative social destination, despite the cell phones. We are invited by a new generation of theorists to think of Canada merely as an imagined community, a proposition, all fluidity and flexibility, an "electric city," as Toronto writer Bruce W. Howe expressed it in his visionary essay, "A Canada of Light." What makes many of my generation anxious – that Canada may be only a process of negotiations toward perpetually redefined goals, unhitched from politics and institutions -these new generation thinkers offer as virtues for a new age. In the theorists' virtual Canada, we Canadians are the sum of our values, cultures, desires, disconnected from what has unhappily become an actual, globalizing and digitizing corporation with its regional office in the House of Commons.

The younger generation has the capacity to feel at home in a symbolically Canadian media universe while actual Canada - its shrunken public spaces, its undefended institutions, its traumatized environment - disappears. This is deeply radical. I still live in a real country while the next Canadians have migrated to a Website.

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