

Grainau At Last!

For years I had watched a parade of literary friends and colleagues – Rudy Wiebe, Aritha van Herk, Smaro Kamboureli, Doug Barbour, Janice Kulyk Keefer - head off for Grainau, one of the most prestigious and among the oldest European conferences on Canadian Studies. I was very envious. I, too, would have liked a European audience with whom to air my views on Canada and its discontents, not to mention an expenses-paid trip to the Bavarian Alps. There was just one (at least) hitch: I am a freelance writer unattached to a university, whereas the above-mentioned invitees are or were all occupying academic positions.

Well, I consoled myself, you can see the point of view of the organizers of the conference. By inviting Rudy et al., they get two people for the price of one, as it were: an academic scholar and a creative writer wrapped up in the same person. Academics, we all agree, are those among us literati who also *theorize*, weaving large, abstract and beautiful patterns of ideas into an *argument* about their *texts*. If you were a conference organizer, wouldn't you want such a guest instead of a mere attic-dwelling, penny-pinching artiste grubbing for a free buffet dinner?

Imagine my astonishment, then, when I received an invitation to come to Grainau 2005! The event is always hosted by the Association of German-Speaking Universities for Canadian Studies, and so the conference carried a German title: *Nachdenken uber das Soziale: Global, Lokal, Individuell*. Rethinking the Social: Global, Local, Individual. It seemed a comprehensive enough theme to include my own preoccupations, but I warned the organizers that I would speak as a fulltime professional writer, not as a scholar. This did not seem to faze them in the least – and I wondered why more of us professionals don't find ourselves invited to such conferences – and so I submitted my Abstract for a paper I called "The Next Canada: The Social Revisited." And it was accepted.

The fact of the matter was that I was invited on the basis of my work in my 2000 book, *The Next Canada: In Search of the Future Nation*, and the updating I've done on my conclusions at a number of conferences since. This too was gratifying: that a Canadian Studies conference was living up to its name, a conference that spanned the breadth of Canadian topics and not just literary ones. For example, there were papers on the politics of poverty, regional governance, "native identity constructions," Nunavut's development, the "multicultural welfare state," language and social cohesion, linguistics, sexuality in the armed forces, consumerism, virtual teaching resources, and, in a grand finale, a panel discussion among four Canadians, "Towards a new world society?" in which we all agreed with each other (we were all of a certain age and social democratic tendency), much to the disappointment of the facilitator, who wanted some sparks to fly. "Next time," I advised him, "invite somebody from the political science department at the U of Calgary."

The other point of enormous gratification was the number of young graduates in Canadian Studies from a wide swath of Europe; Germany, Austria and Switzerland, of course, Finland, Spain, Sweden, the Netherlands, Norway, France, Poland and Bulgaria. (Bulgaria was represented by two ravishing PhDs about to start teaching their first Canadian Studies course at the University of Sofia. They have a brand-new, Bulgarian-published textbook to teach from, but I came bearing other gifts: a wall map of Canada, copies of *Books in Canada*, and a tin of maple syrup.)

I sat in as many sessions of interest as I could, and I share with you some of my literary notes. “How Native is Native If You Are Native?” asked Steffi Retzlaff of Potsdam University, who listed all the variations of “native” identity imposed since first contact with Europeans: “Indian” as the first construction in a romanticized encounter with “India”; “savage,” in the second construction, of a population become a hindrance to colonial enterprise; modern “Indian,” the assimilated, poor, substance-abuser and sometimes militant. All these names are still in circulation - as well as First Nation, a political statement that rejects the rhetoric of the “two Founding Nations” and now includes all Aboriginal people, Inuit and Metis as well. Clearly, “labelling is a political act,” she concluded.

Eva Gruber of Konstanz University, Germany, wondered “what do Indians have to laugh about?” in a session about humour in contemporary Native Canadian literature. She examined work by Richard Wagamese, Monique Mojica, Louise Halfe, Drew Hayden Taylor and Thomas King, all of them literary instances of “post-colonial traumatic stress disorder.” Gruber argued that, because “humour flouts one-dimensional representation, levels hierarchies and strengthens collective identity,” it functions to make certain historical “facts” unfamiliar and to “dismantle” the historical self that white Canadians have constructed of ourselves. (Anyone who has seen the current work of actor/playwright, Darrel Dennis, *Tales of an Urban Indian*, as I did in a recent Edmonton festival, has to wonder though just how “dismantled” a white audience will feel when the humour is so engaging, infectious and well, inclusive?)

In the session I shared with Jutta Zimmermann, of Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, Germany, I was grateful for the notes she passed around to help us follow her argument about “the new Sentimentalism in recent Canadian fiction,” a topic I would never have thought would interest me – new Sentimentalism? I’d never even heard of the old one – but which enthralled me. I confess to not being a reader of the most recent Jane Urquhart, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Yann Martel or David Adams Richards. (In my defense, let me explain that I’ve been reading other stuff.) But Zimmermann’s thesis was provocative anyway. In observing the changes in Canadian fiction since the 1990s, she argued that most of the prize-winning and best-selling fiction now is a long way from the innovative writing of fifteen years ago – “self-reflexivity [read: post-modernism] has exhausted itself” – and the new fiction is now absorbed by themes of “spirituality, religion, ethics, the sublime,” in other words, new forms of nineteenth-century Sentimentalism. The

task of the new Sentimentalism is to re-establish what the novels of the 1840s – 1860s represented, “feeling as a universal moral sense” and a means to extend humanity to those from whom it has been withheld: child, prisoner, slave, animal. (I must admit this does give me a new perspective on that celebrated tiger in the Booker prize-winning boat.)

This even doesn't have much to do with the novel of social protest against social divisions and injustice from the 1930s to 1960s, which, Zimmermann argues, was still concerned with issues of land, nation, belonging and post-colonial resistance, rather than with the cultural work of the “lens of the soul” which the new novels take up. She didn't say so explicitly but I interpreted her analysis as concluding that, because of the ravages of post-modern irony and contingency, the new Sentimentalists are trying to reimagine “community” as solidarity with “fellow sufferers.” Whew. Where can I sign up?

Meanwhile, over at the francophone sessions, the “two solitudes” played themselves out even in the Bavarian Alps: presenters, topics, bibliographies, vocabularies, all referred to another culture, altogether different from the one I was immersed in among the anglophones. The one event that brought the two worlds together was the literary readings presented by Lise Gauvin of Montreal and myself with our own work! We'd never heard of each other, bien entendu.

But when something from that world was introduced to the rest of us in English, the keen interest was palpable. The Keynote on the first evening, for instance, was a revelation: Andree Levesque of McGill University exposed to us the utterly fascinating story of the Quebecois journalist Eva Circe-Cote (1871-1949), whose beat covered just about everything, from infant mortality rates to women's education to labour relations to immigration to anti-Semitism, and whose work is completely out of print.

Why do these Europeans care so much about us Canadians? About ten years ago, at a smaller conference in Budapest, I heard a German professor in a *cri de coeur* plead for the continued “experiment” that Canada represented, especially in our multicultural experience; between the lines he was pleading for the cause of all smaller nations and cultures in a globalizing world. But Canada is no longer an experiment, much of our social and cultural achievements are part- *fait accompli*, part-work-in-progress, and now I sense, after 9/11, after Iraq, after Missile Defense Shields, that European Canadianists study us for strategic purposes: how to survive *American* globalism.

Myself, at the end of the weekend, I wondered how I was going to survive German cooking: they eat lots of red meat, they make butter sauces, and they put whipped cream on the whipped cream. Grainau! Bring it on!

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