

“The Challenge We Call Canada,” Queen’s University, Kingston ON
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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 a certain hockey game in 1972. I could see from the baffled expressions on the students’ faces that it had finally happened: a whole new generation had arrived who didn’t have a clue what I was talking about. Their memories went as far back as, perhaps, 1970, in the case of the grade ten class, no further back than about 1987. (That was seven years ago; now a grade ten class would remember as far back as, maybe, 1994.)

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 of Canadian against Soviet all-stars. On the other side stood the ranks of the next Canadians for whom the world of free trade agreements, digital communication, rising tuition fees, and corporate logos in washroom stalls was utterly normal. I could choose to react to this 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 still characterized the last truly “Canadian” generation, namely my own, the ubiquitous and perennial Boomers. Or, given the fact that, according to the 1996 national census, there were 4,557,233 Canadians between the ages of 25 and 35, I could make an expedition out into the terrain of the “next” Canada to see if pessimism and defeatism were justified.

Pessimism and defeatism: I have in mind here what writer Douglas Coupland, in *Polaroids from the Dead*, called the “denarration” of his generation X, the personal “storylessness” of a generation whose narratives of experience had been dissolved in borderless, denationalized media, and whose familial, class and cultural continuity had been broken, along with the communities that had transmitted them. But were these the only salient observations to make about the next Canadians? What of that reminder from George Grant - gloomy conservative nationalist that he was in the 1960s, in his little, explosive book, *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism* - that a nation is not a nation just because of roots in the past. He wrote: “Memory is never enough to guarantee that a nation can articulate itself in the present. There must also be a thrust of intention into the future.”

Are we Canadians only because of roots in a shared past? What happens when the past is unknown or forgotten or blurry or locked up somewhere or simply declared not the point somehow? Take, for example, the man who wrote a Letter to the Editor of the *Globe & Mail* a couple of years ago, in which he took exception to the annual lamentation of the Dominion Institute and its revelation, once again, that Canadians don’t know their own history. He wrote: “May Canadians stay history- and ideology-free for many years. In this crazy world, it seems to me, those who learn their history are doomed to fight over it.”

Understanding the “thrust of intention into the future” of the next generation of Canadians became my project: to see and hear for myself what sort of Canada was taking shape in their lives and minds and whether I wanted to live in it, to be thrust forwards into their future.

Was there a common desire, I wanted to know, in the disparate expressions of young Canadians as workers, artists, business people, social activists, and politicians? Did they want to extend some meaning of their personal experience forwards into a collective purpose? Was there something they *wanted*, as Canadians in their own time and place?

My book, *The Next Canada: In Search of our Future Nation*, is the account of that investigation. Did I find that “thrust of intention”? In a word, yes, and the word is *community*. It is their word; they kept

using it. Young politicians were committed to a “community of tolerance.” Activists worked in “communities of the poor” and with the “street people’s community.” As if out of the wild blue yonder, Reclaim the Streets protesters evoked “the commonality, the desire for a community itself.” Young workers said their workplace was a “communal space.” An “alternative capitalist” spoke of the responsibility he bore to the “community” of young consumers he was profiting from. Urban idealists, having grown up in the suburban sprawl of Wal-Mart and Taco Bell and Cineplex Odeon, deplored the collapse of what their parents’ generation still had, “circles of commitment” in their relations with neighbours. High-tech wizards confessed to a “cultural hunger” for “rootedness,” as though there were something unbearably shallow and lonely-making about their new world of borderless communication. They were telling me that, in their diverse ways, and where they found themselves, they were resisting assaults on their sense of community with one another. I was reminded of what Murray Dobbin referred to in a speech in Edmonton while I was writing my book, to “the necessary revolution of the things we do together.”

But I also felt a cautionary tug about this feel-good sense of “community:” Those of us who believed or hoped that there was some kind of ideal “community” or public into which all diversity and difference would dissolve had been challenged, since at least the 1970s, by those for whom the “public” never did include them: workers, minorities, women, the disabled, children, sexual minorities. In reaction they have formed their own counter-communities or alternative publics. Community is not a pre-determined given but is imagined and constructed. There is no single overarching public sphere; get used to it. Or, as Claude Denis asserts, in *We Are Not You: First Nations and Canadian Modernity*, “all publics...are specialized.”

Nevertheless, *all* my interviewees were insistent about one sense of community in particular: the place/space called Canada. No matter where I turned with my question, “Are you a Canadian? How do you know?” - to an actor at the Edmonton Fringe Festival or an autoworker in Windsor, to a sex researcher in Montreal or a lobster fisher in Nova Scotia, to a Reform Party MP in Edmonton or a food bank director in Toronto, a CBC radio producer in Winnipeg or a women’s shelter volunteer in Vancouver - I was answered much the same way. *We take care of each other. Money isn’t our bottom line. We are a compassionate society.* I remember the Starbucks’ barista in Vancouver, who said that being a Canadian means more than just the “almighty dollar,” as he put it. “We have to work together to get things done.” In his case, that meant joining the Canadian Auto Workers union. “I love the CWA,” he said.

And over and over again people cited publicly funded health care as evidence, summarized as: “I know I’m Canadian because I believe in the social commitment of public health care.” This was unexpected, even shocking. After all, the future of health care is a heated debate across Canada, and I did not think such a contested policy could serve as a foundation for collective identity. But my Next Canadians seemed impervious to the sarcasm of cynics - who typically argue that anyone who depends on a health care plan for an identity should “get a life” - preferring, it seemed, the deeply political value of social justice, which they identified with Canadian citizenship and conscience.

I began to understand that by “publicly funded health care” my interviewees didn’t so much mean the thing itself - the creature of policy and bureaucracy - but the *idea*, even ideal, of mutual responsibility and connectedness, what social philosopher Ian Angus, at Simon Fraser University, in conversation with me, called the construction of a “fictive history.” The history we *want*. People want a language not just of economics but of what American social scientist Jeremy Rifkin calls “empathy” and culture as well. And what I call a language of Canadian *desire*.

I concluded my book on an optimistic note, convinced that somehow or other my generation indeed had managed to reproduce the next generation of conscious Canadians. From my generation’s perspective of cultural nationalism, Canada should have been “disappeared” - into American television and franchised coffee shops and Asian sweat shops - yet here they were, young Canadians for whom Canada is still a homeplace, a specific social and cultural destination worth preserving into the new

century.

But even so I was left with a troubling thought, which intensified over the next several months. Stephen Cassady's parents have always had two cars, he has always had colour TV, he's never not had access to public transportation, he's never not had medicare. Stephen Cassady, electronic magazine publisher in Calgary, is younger than medicare. "Do you think all that just dropped out of the sky?" I asked. "Yeah, it's very natural," he said.

By "natural" he seemed to mean that that was how things just are, in Canada. Assaults on social programs were part of a cycle, he figured, the political swings back and forth, the shifts, the modifications and changes, over the long haul of history, "but you can't permanently damage things. I think that in Canada there are some inalienable trends that have existed historically. Canada will always be a social system-supporting country with health care and advances in education and in telecommunications. Without it we're toast."

This was heart-warming to hear but it left me uneasy. Hadn't he ever read the stuff from the Council of Canadians? Or from the Fraser Institute for that matter? Close to 50 million Americans have no health insurance but the Canadian Council of Chief Executives has called for health care to be "run like a business" with "performance bonuses" and "corporate discipline." [*The Canada We Want*, Barlow] Where, in Cassady's optimism, was a reflection of the cuts to the Canada Health and Social Transfer plan in the 1990s under a Liberal government, the unsustainable levels of student debt, the one in five Canadian children who live in poverty, the homeless, the jobless in booming economies? Advances in education? What would Cassady say about the news last week that, even as our population of young people grows obese and ill, Ontario's huge Peel School Board has sucked up \$5.5 million from its ongoing ten-year contract with the Coca-Cola Bottling Company?

By a United Nations index we may have been the best country in the world to live in for a few years but a recent OECD study confirms that Canada is spending 15% *less* on social programs than a decade ago. [Barlow 7] Was it possible, I wondered, that a generation of satisfied Canadians had arrived for whom Canada was a kind of virtual, feel-good country, while the actual country was under severe stress?

In that other, *actual*, Canada, the government of the day and its servants, are quietly negotiating the terms of our compliance with the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) at the World Trade Organization, an agreement that could well open up our public health care system to for-profit multinational health corporations. Or perhaps we will do it to ourselves: this June 2004 the Supreme Court of Canada will hear a Charter case, twice defeated at lower levels, that argues patients should have the right to access private health systems – jump the queue - to pay for medically-necessary procedures rather than wait their turn within the public system. A tenth-anniversary review of NAFTA (Jim Stanford, *G&M* Dec 22/03) finds that raw materials – resources and industrial products – still make up half our exports, our economic productivity has fallen another 10% behind the Americans, and the free-trading United States still slaps trade sanctions on our exports of wheat, dairy, potatoes, softwood lumber and magazines. Yet in sympathy with the American "war on terror," we have legislated Bill C-36 within our own jurisdiction and expanded the investigative and surveillance powers of the police over ourselves.

Alongside this hardcore reality, we are invited by theorists to think of Canada nevertheless as an *imagined* community, a proposition, all fluidity and flexibility, an "electric city," as writer B.W. Powe expressed it in *A Canada of Light*. What makes many of my generation anxious about post-modernity -

that Canada may be only a process of negotiations toward perpetually redefined goals, unhitched from politics and institutions - they offer as virtues for a new age. In this *virtual* Canada, we Canadians are the sum of our values, cultures, desires, disconnected from an actual, market-driven, globalizing and digitizing corporation with its regional office in the House of Commons.

A post-FTA generation that has been weaned on the language of market values, deficits, downsizing, privatizing, of brand names celebrated as culture, governments pronounced oppressive, borders declared irrelevant, declares that "here" is not a geohistorical place - as it was for my generation who took borders seriously as the fence between us and the American "there" - but a landscape of communications. The ultimate postmodern nation is based on a system of networks and is the sum of its telecommunications links, not its railways. These citizens cohabit in overlapping micro- and sub-cultures of culture, gender, and ethnicity, and for them the perennial Canadian identity crisis is an opportunity to develop a whole series of morphed electronic 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. So, the younger generation has the capacity to feel at home in a symbolically Canadian media universe while *actual* Canada - its shrinking public spaces, its deregulated public enterprises, its traumatized environment - disappears. This is deeply radical.

Well, as I've been pondering the question, I've also been adding feel-good material of my own to the fattening file I keep called "The *Next Next* Canada." Hundreds of thousands of young Canadians have gathered in solidarity with global *millions*, in what the BBC has called "peace protests," whether against the post-colonial wars and occupations in Afghanistan and Iraq, or to challenge the polarity of McWorld vs Jihad. The students of the University of Alberta support a campus PIRG, with working groups on Alberta's petroleum industry and media analysis a women's centre. As they acquire the experience of mobilization and education, in Mexico and India and South Africa and Brazil, they join the ranks of the politicians of civil society in Canada, where the context of their activity keeps morphing.

For example, Canada has become the 100th country to ratify the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change, receiving the support of Liberal, Bloc Quebecois and NDP members of Parliament. As Americans right, left and centre, have wrestled with their demons - security panics, bankrupt public schools, and Standing Room Only on Death Row - Canadians have become the poster kids who *don't* go "Bowling for Columbine." Only 15% of us favoured fighting a war in Iraq alongside the US without UN sanction. Three out of four Canadians still believe, on reflection, that Canada did the right thing. [*G&M* March 15/04] Sixty per cent of us feel that the *dominance* of American culture in our society is a threat to our own cultural survival - showing that Canadians, French- and English-speaking, are still attached to made-in-Canada cultural identity in the face of global Americanization. A Canadian documentary film about the "pathological" behaviour of corporations, *The Corporation*, has been packing in audiences and winning awards internationally. (This follows on the prestige of Zacharias Kunuk's *Atanarjuat* filmed entirely in Nunavut in the Inuktitut language, and winner of international and Canadian accolades.)

Canadians consistently report, from one survey to the next, year after year, including the 20-somethings, that they would *not* be better off as Americans, thanks anyway. (Americans have returned the favour by not liking us very much: down from 11% to 7% in a recent survey.) The *New York Times* has declared that Canada's stance on social issues is opening rifts with the United States. This isn't likely to diminish any time soon: according to Michael Adams' *Fire and Ice: The United States, Canada and the Myth of Converging Values* (2003), since 1992 the liberal-social democratic centre of Canadian society has expanded as compared with young Americans' drift to "nihilism and anomie." Last year, as the US closed in on a unilateral declaration of war on Iraq, 10,000 war protestors converged on the University of Toronto, joining what British journalist Yvonne Ridley called "the biggest superpower in the world today, the anti-war movement." At the end of 2003, *Time* magazine's

choice for (collective) Person of the Year was three young soldiers serving in Iraq. In *Maclean's*, the leading notable Canadian for the year was Stephen Lewis, UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa; the *Globe & Mail* picked the panel of Ontario judges whose ruling opened the way for same-sex marriage. As Glenn Walton, a Halifax-based filmmaker and writer wrote in *The Daily News* (carried on www.rabble.ca), "that's reason for a kind of pride."

Whether it's the Canadian who signs a petition against the bulk export of water or who is in the streets as a "peace protester," or who serves in the RCMP wearing a turban, the message is the same: the citizens of Canada have our own interests, and politicians had better serve them.

There are resilient arguments in circulation, that we do live in new times, when the lost "romantic hope" of Canadian nationalism (Grant's original "lament") has again become a necessary tool against the "ignoble delusions of public men". Nationalism, it is argued in some quarters, is making a comeback, not just as a hope but also as a strategy of a new or renewed politics that wants to link the Canadian "talk" of values with the Canadian "walk" of a just society. Our new, and so far unelected, prime minister spent a long preparation in the corridors of corporate power tending to its "bottom line" before becoming Finance minister where his biggest idea was to slash the deficit. Many Canadians now fear the possibility that his government will move even further away from the Red centre of Liberalism toward a program of "deep integration" with policy made in Washington and the transnational corporations, with that harmonizing quartet of privatization, deregulation, smaller government and wide-open free trade.

Since Canadians repeatedly reject such extremism, there is opportunity here for the recuperation of progressive nationalism, defined by Gordon Laxer of the Parkland Institute at the University of Alberta as attachment to the "sovereignty of the political community to which one belongs." (*Alternatives* 26, 2001)

In *Harper's* magazine (March 2004), John Ralston Saul, taking the very long view, notes that grand economic theories don't last more than a few decades, so this one's time is just about up: globalization with its attendant technocratic and technological determinism. Its once-vaunted inevitability is now defended by increasingly-hysterical apologists for the Big Idea of the last 30 years: subordination of the public good to the private interests of capital and the military-entertainment complex. The transnational corporation had been declared a virtual nation unto itself, overlooking the fact that "natural resources are fixed in place, inside nation-states. And consumers live on real land in real places. These are called countries. . . . Latin America no longer believes in Globalization. Neither does Africa. Nor does a good part of Asia. Globalization is no longer global." Instead, we have the defeat of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment, the election of Hugo Chavez and Luiz Lula da Silva, the drafting at UNESCO of an international instrument to protect cultural diversity from international trade agreements, and more than 80, 000 people from 132 countries and representing 2,660 organizations at this year's World Social Forum in Mumbai, India.

Contrary to my own fears of only a couple of years ago - the fear that young Canadians' sense of their irreducible Canadianness was no deeper than a brand-name ("My Canada includes health care"), leaving the "old Canada" in the hands of the usual suspects - it seems that they do in fact live in a real country. While the mass movement of young people in the street is still just that - a *movement* that has influence but no direct political power - it nevertheless is a constituency of *values*.

Last year while I was writer-in-residence at the Saskatoon Public Library, I had the chance to interview John Ralston Saul for the local alternative weekly, *Planet S*. He repeated there what I think of as one of his "mantras," that Canadians are blessed, thanks to a few hundred years of collective experience, with a surplus of "social imagination." For all our self-confessed ambiguities and perplexities about our identity, we are in fact fully conscious of what our real interests are. The crises of the "war on terrorism" and the occupation of Iraq are good examples of how Canadians want "to think calmly when the air is filled with the clamour of war:" To be calm doesn't mean sitting idly by, it means strengthening civil authority and civic society instead of panicking and sending out the troops.

(Someone should now ask him why we are in Haiti. To quote from Yves Engler, a political activist at Concordia reporting at *rabble.ca*: “Was there a coup in Haiti and did Canada support it? We do know Canadian troops were present at the airport when President Jean-Bertrand Aristide left the country. We do know Canada stood by and did nothing to support the legally elected president of the country as he faced armed opposition. We do know right-wing American politicians are already touting Canada's complicity as justification for U.S. policy in Haiti.”)

We are who we are because of the highly successful and original “experiment” of Canada: complexity and compromise. We have a political culture that is already quite old with us, as old as First Nations’ treaties with the Crown, as old as our Constitution, our popular resistance movements, our multiculturalism and bi-lingualism, our commitment to multilateralism and the flag of the United Nations (well, most of the time). These are not just collective memories but *shared* (sometimes contested) memories, the product of institutions for which we agree to be collectively responsible: our monuments and commemorations, public schools and universities, publicly-owned media and subsidized arts, and, yes, a public health care plan. The commitment to such institutions represents both a “we” that remembers and a “we” imagining the future. (See “You must remember this,” Kwame Anthony Appiah, *NYRB*, March 13/03 pp35-37)

So I am back where I started, with George Grant’s idea of a nation as a “thrust of intention into the future,” Canada as the *dream* of the “next” Canada. It is rooted in a culture that emerges from our notorious post-modernism - our ambiguity, flexibility, negotiability, our being Canadian-as-possible-under-the-circumstances. We are, as others have declared, a work-in-progress. Which is another way of saying, I think, that we are a culture of hope.