

Wild Words

ESSAYS ON ALBERTA LITERATURE

Edited by Donna Coates
and George Melnyk



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THE DOOMED GENRE: MYRNA KOSTASH AND THE LIMITS OF NON-FICTION

LISA GREKUL

In an article that appeared in a recent issue of *Quill and Quire* – “In praise of journalism: Why the ‘creative non-fiction’ label obscures the real value of true stories about the world” (2005) – Myrna Kostash makes a surprising about-face with regard to “creative non-fiction,” repudiating the value of the genre that she has spent the better part of her career defending. Readers who are familiar with Kostash’s work know her as an overtly politicized voice in Canadian Prairie literature, outspoken in her views as a third-generation Ukrainian Canadian, a feminist, and a New Left socialist. But for years, “whenever [she] could,” she also “championed the cause of ‘creative non-fiction’” (Kostash, “In Praise” 14). Many of the books that comprise her oeuvre – including *All of Baba’s Children* (1977), *Long Way From Home: The Story of the Sixties Generation in Canada* (1980), *The Doomed Bridegroom: A Memoir* (1998), and *The Next Canada: In Search of the Future Nation* (2000) – could be, and indeed have been, termed “creative non-fiction.” In lectures, articles,

and workshops, moreover, she has persistently argued for the value of the “creative non-fiction” genre.¹

Not alone² in practicing and promoting a craft that is inherently slippery – though not without defining characteristics – Kostash admits that settling on a single term is no easy task. “Creative non-fiction,” she says, can also be classified as “literary non-fiction, literary journalism, [or] creative documentary” (“In Praise” 14). In her introduction to *Going Some Place: Creative Non-fiction Across Canada* (2002), Lynne Van Loven concurs, arguing that “the genre includes poetic personal journals, meditations, memoirs, activist personal reportage, autobiography, personal essays on being an outsider, historical and literary travelogues, tributes to a particular person, celebrations of a distinctive place, and explorations of the past” (ii). Clearly, “creative non-fiction” is complexly hybrid – and yet there is ample evidence to suggest that it has become the accepted term for a recognizable literary tradition. Consider, for example, the Edna Staebler Award for Creative Non-fiction (aimed at texts that are “literary rather than journalistic,” by writers who “[do] not merely give information, but intimately shar[e] an experience with the reader by telling a factual story with the devices of fiction, original research, well-crafted interpretive writing, personal discovery or experience, the creative use of language or approach to the subject matter, dialogue, and narrative”) or the Pittsburgh-based journal *Creative Nonfiction* (which publishes work by writers who “employ the diligence of a reporter, the shifting voices and viewpoints of a novelist, the refined wordplay of a poet and the analytical modes of the essayist”) or the recent special issue of *Women’s Studies* devoted to “creative nonfiction.”³

But despite the fact that “creative non-fiction” has been embraced in some circles, the extent to which it has been marginalized in the Canadian literary mainstream is amply evinced by the genre’s long list of institutional slights, outlined by Kostash in an earlier article, “The crisis of non-fiction,” published in *Canadian Issues* (2003). As she points out, with the “glamourization of Can Lit and the Celebrity Novel,” fiction has come to dominate “the literary festivals, creative writing programs and schools, the sexy prizes, the book clubs, translation grants, [and] international Canadian Studies conferences” (25).⁴ Forums, she says, that one might expect to have a “lively curiosity” in creative non-fiction, such as “the book review sections of newspapers and journals,” are “vastly more interested in the cult of the novel” (25). Part of the problem, well illustrated by the dearth of critical work on her own writing,⁵ is that genres of non-fiction are rarely taught, studied, or

written about by literary scholars (25). The “real crisis,” though – at least according to Kostash – lies in the “apparent indifference of the large majority of readers... to the national discourses on society that circulate” in creative non-fiction (25). “How many times,” she asks, “have I heard otherwise thoughtful people, literate citizens, claim never to read non-fiction as a matter of some principle: they find it too ‘depressing’ or ‘fatiguing’ to read at the end of a stressful day” (25).

In her 2005 *Quill and Quire* article, then, acknowledging that writers of “creative non-fiction” have made at least a few inroads in the Canadian literary institution (“[w]riting programs have opened up to non-fiction... substantial prizes are distributed to its writers, literary journals regularly feature ‘creative non-fiction’” [“In praise” 14]), Kostash nonetheless finds herself reconsidering the genre’s nomenclature. For her, CanLit’s partial and reluctant embrace of her craft is a case of “too little, too late.” Midway through the article – after she explains that, “since the literary establishment turned up its nose at non-fiction, we could only establish our right to be treated as equal to fiction writers and poets if we called ourselves *creative* non-fiction writers” – she unceremoniously drops the first part of the label. Fed up with having to “play” to the literary mainstream’s love of fiction, she says,

I now believe that “creative non-fiction” is an overused term for writing that is essentially narrative prose (magazine writers have been writing the stuff for generations), and when we use it we exhibit the “cultural cringe” of non-fiction writers who are ashamed their roots are showing. The genre of non-fiction books began in journalism, with the writer as witness to his or her world, and it’s time we reclaimed our origins. (14)

And so the genre Kostash once referred to as “creative non-fiction” becomes, for her, “‘non-fiction,’ without any qualification or tarding up” (14).

What are we to make of Kostash’s change of heart? Do generic labels really matter, and can they be decided on once and for all, when we are talking about an inherently hybrid genre? What is at stake for writers, and for readers, in Kostash’s call for “non-fiction” to be recognized as such? When we, as readers, identify a text as “non-fiction,” *tout court*, what expectations do we bring to our interpretation of it? Are they different from those we would bring to an ostensibly more “creative” genre? And, most importantly (for this discussion at least), how do we approach a “non-fiction” text

that explores the complexities of diasporic subjectivity – itself a largely imagined state?

Bloodlines: A Journey Into Eastern Europe, her 1993 work, can be examined in light of both Kostash's *Quill and Quire* recantation article and recent genre-based life writing scholarship. The primary goal of this paper is to explore how Kostash's identity may change when we categorize the text as "non-fiction," and how her diasporic identity is informed by the genre in which she writes.⁶ *Bloodlines*, the first of the two books she has written about her travels to Central and Eastern Europe (*The Doomed Bridegroom: A Memoir* was published five years later, in 1998), closely "fits" the description of "non-fiction,"⁷ and I want to focus on a text about this "other" part of the world that most clearly supports Kostash's claims about "non-fiction" (that it is "narrative prose"; that the genre "began in journalism, with the writer as witness to his or her world"; that it involves "lobbing arguments into the public square" ["In praise" 14]).



As Laurie McNeill explains, in her introduction to the 2005 issue of *Life Writing* devoted to "Reconsidering Genre," the burgeoning of life writing scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s produced "genre-based definitions" that allowed writers and critics not only to justify life writing as "literary texts worthy of study" but also to "make clear how [the] texts should be read" (McNeill xii). Referring to Carolyn Miller's theorization of genres as "social actions" – as "recognizable responses," that is, "to recurring situations" – McNeill notes that genre has come to be seen by many scholars as an integral tool for "understanding the actions people imagine performing when they create texts based on their lives" (McNeill xiii).⁸ Genre, within this model, teaches us how to recognize a text's function; how to detect the social "work" that its writer has set out to do. Given that generic "fuzziness" is, as Peter Medway suggests, a hallmark of life writing ("[p]erhaps," he says, "there are degrees of genre-ness, from tightly defined... to baggy and indeterminate" [Medway quoted in McNeill xiv]),⁹ sifting through a text in search of formal properties that will justify the affixing of a generic label seems unproductive unless we give concentrated thought to the *purpose* of that label. Though "genres are still expected to display characteristic textual forms... [i]dentifying patterns of text format, syntactical and lexical choice, and discursive ordering [...] is no longer considered sufficient for pinning down the genre" (Medway quoted in McNeill xiii).¹⁰ Rather, each "fuzzy" form of life writing fulfills its

unique function (“at particular places and times, for particular authors” [McNeill xiii]) because readers can and do “identify ‘genre-ness,’ and all the expectations and cultural freight attached to specific forms, without forcing a text into one labeled box” (McNeill xv). “The point,” according to G. Thomas Couser, “is to interrogate [the text’s] *form* as a means of understanding its *function* and its *force*: how particular genres encode or reinforce particular values in ways that may shape culture and history” (Couser 129–30). Form matters, in short, only insofar as its function is understood and agreed upon between writer and reader.

In terms of subject matter, *Bloodlines* explores Kostash’s complex engagements with the people, the politics, and the histories of various countries in Eastern Europe. The text grows out of six separate trips she made to this part of the world over an eleven-year period, beginning in 1982 and ending in 1991. Divided into four chapters, each focused on a single country to which she made repeat visits (Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Poland, and Ukraine), the narrative is not without structure, but it follows no linear chronology of her travels, nor does it cohere around a clearly discernible plot. As Kostash explains in her introduction, “I did not travel haphazardly. I had a plan” (1).

Initially, my idea was to interview writers of my generation, bred by the events of the 1960s, who were writing from within the opposition in their respective societies. I was most interested in how they coped, as creative people, with the political demands of their situation. [...] I limited myself to Slavic Central and Eastern Europe (excluding, therefore, Rumania, Hungary, and Bulgaria) as I felt, in some still unformulated way, that my project was “about” ethnicity. My third traveller’s hat was that of the New Left socialist. [...] I wanted to see for myself how “actually existing socialism” looked and wondered how this might affect my own political beliefs. (1–2)

And yet, even as she admits that “[t]his all sounds neat and tidy,” Kostash is upfront about the extent to which she “lost control” of her plan (2). Forced to question her existing assumptions about Eastern Europe, to do a “prodigious amount of reading,” and to learn new languages (she “learned to speak Ukrainian” [2] and became fluent in a “generic Slav speech” that included “a little bit of everything – Serbo-Croat, Slovene, Slovak, Polish and Ukrainian” [3]), she found that, “each time [she] traveled [she] was turned

inside out again" (2). Not surprisingly, the chaotic structure of the text – its constant temporal and geographical movement – reflects the “turbulent” and “upsetting” nature of her travels (2).

Given the subject matter of the text, *Bloodlines* most transparently belongs to the travelogue genre, though critics who have worked on the text quibble about this label. Eva-Marie Kröller, for example, broadly describes the text as a “travel book” but then qualifies her statement by specifying that *Bloodlines* is a work of “leftist tourism” (354). Smaro Kamboureli, acknowledging that the text resembles travelogue, cautions that it “[does] not fit *neatly* into the tradition of travelogues” (at least not those by authors who unselfconsciously occupy the position of the privileged traveler) because Kostash is rarely unaware of the politics of her foreign-ness (Kamboureli 167, my emphasis). And yet there are many points in the text where the author plays the unmistakable part of the apolitical tourist, observing her surroundings for the sheer delight of it (“we pass... bare-footed youths whacking at the weeds in the field-strips of corn, wheat and beans, the crops gaily broadcast with red poppies” [Kostash, *Bloodlines* 74]; “[t]ypical of European cemeteries, Lychakivsky is a very pleasant place for a stroll” [178]). And given that the narrative opens with a scene that is “normative” to travel writing, it clearly borrows some conventions from the travelogue genre. The first chapter, focused on Czechoslovakia, begins with the foreigner being initiated into her journey (Kamboureli 172) as Kostash receives advice from Zdena, a Czech-in-exile: “I am to telephone her from the continent. I am to ask her how the weather is. If she tells me it is cold and wet, I am not to go to Prague or attempt any contacts there. If she tells me the weather is fine, I may proceed” (Kostash, *Bloodlines* 6). This conversation marks the point at which Kostash, a “Westerner” unaccustomed to the need for such secrecy, faces the threshold to the foreign and repressive “East,” but the scene also hints at her determination to cross over, regardless of risk. When she calls her friend Zdena from Prague, and when Zdena’s son answers the phone, giving her the ambiguous news that the weather is “[n]ot bad,” Kostash’s response is unequivocal: “I decide I will go to Prague” (6). Kostash’s decision to proceed, despite the ambiguity of the son’s weather report and the possible danger it foreshadows, sets the stage for the rest of the book. From the get-go, just as her plans are disrupted and she is consequently forced to improvise alternatives so too does the narrative of her travels proceed without an apparent chronological or geographical logic. But while the travelogue aspects of *Bloodlines* are neither “neat” nor “tidy,” they are nonetheless present in the text.

Travelogue it may resemble, but *Bloodlines* also has much in common with academic writing – historical scholarship, more specifically. The text is rife with moments, for instance, in which Kostash draws attention to the fact that she is well-versed in traditions of travel writing about Eastern Europe (“Prague,” she writes, “is the Paris of the East – so say travel guides and travelers before me” [6]; “Kalemegdan Park, approached from town centre along the old Stamboul road, was observed by Rebecca West in 1937 to be ‘the special glory of Belgrade’” [56]). The entire book, moreover, is framed by devices that construct Kostash as an authority on the histories, political structures, and cultural nuances of the countries that she visits. *Bloodlines* is prefaced by a map of Eastern Europe (n.p.)¹¹ and it concludes with some seven pages’ worth of “notes” in which the author lists the scholarly sources she consulted and provides detailed comments on their usefulness. Additionally, each chapter begins with a “snapshot” of major historical events that took place in the country during the period following the Second World War. (“Czechoslovakia” opens, for example, with “1946: *Communists win 38 per cent of popular vote in free elections* 1948: *taking advantage of trade union support during political crisis*, *Communists seize power* 1949–52: *show trials of Communist ‘renegades’*” [5]). Reinforcing her authoritative position vis-à-vis the subject matter of her book, Kostash textures every chapter with historical references, background information on local politics, explanations of major movements, figures, and events. The places she visits and the conversations she has with locals are always burdened for Kostash by the history that precedes them. To visit an Orthodox church is to be reminded that “[t]his church, and all the nations that have embraced it, have been ‘eastern’ since 285 A.D. when Diocletian, himself a Dalmatian, divided the Roman Empire into two administrative units, the western part governed from Rome, the eastern one from Constantinople” (80). To chat with Zdenek about his childhood summer holidays in Uzhhorod is to recall that “[i]n Slovakia during the war, the Nazis recruited local Ukrainians into a special brigade formed for the purpose of assaulting the local Slovak villages” (30). As readers, we have the sense that, through these and countless other “informative” moments, we are reading history lessons with Kostash as teacher. She wants to learn, and teach readers, about the first-hand experience of living in this part of the world. As a result, *Bloodlines* contains countless journalistic interviews and excerpts of reported conversations between Kostash and the people she meets. Each chapter offers a veritable litany of names (she usually uses first names only and sometimes changes names to

protect individuals' identities). But her brief and superficial "reports" of the individuals she meets achieve an important objective in the text: they illustrate the extent to which she travels as a journalist, gathering as much information as she can in a short period of time, writing concise "stories," much like a newspaper reporter, that hinge on key, pithy quotations.

In part a travelogue, then, in part a history "textbook," in part a work of journalism, *Bloodlines* is also autobiographical, since the only consistently recurring, multi-dimensional "character" in the book is Kostash herself. As she takes on the roles of traveler, observer, recorder, and translator, everything we learn in *Bloodlines* about Eastern Europe is not only filtered through her (raising questions about the reliability of her observations) but also, ultimately, *about* her. The loose structure of the narrative allows Kostash to insert herself into her observations of Eastern Europe as well as her discussions of its history and its people. Throughout the text, we find examples of what Kamboureli calls "circuitous" narration (178): the chapter focused on Poland, for instance, opens not in Poland at all but in "Nafplion, Greece, 1981" (Kostash, *Bloodlines* 110), with Kostash watching Polish demonstrations on the television news. Then, reporting from "Gdansk, 1984" (112), she reflects on the strike that took place four years prior, during which "a wooden cross was embedded in the ground on the spot where four striking workers had died in December 1970" (112). And in the next section of the chapter, she is "at Harvard University" (when, she does not say) interviewing a professor of Polish literature who was involved in "clandestine publishing in pre-Solidarity Poland" (115). The disjointed pattern, marked by Kostash's movement in time and place, opens textual spaces for Kostash to embed diary-like reports of her travels with her personal memories of the recent or relatively distant past, as well as interior ruminations on the situations she finds herself in. In Prague, as she attends synagogue with Jiri and notices a large number of Americans in the congregation, she interrupts her account of the service to reflect on "*relatives*" in the diaspora, the "*ones who got away*" and "*saved the bloodlines*" (16). Later, as she and Jiri eat lunch in the Jewish hall, she again interrupts the account with recollections of her grandmother's cooking: "I ache with the familiarity of this soup, ladled out into a flat-bottomed basin, the pattern of the china washed by the clear, yellowish, fatty brother, thin egg noodles afloat like a water plant. It is my baba's chicken soup" (17). Just as her experiences are always burdened by the history preceding them, so too are they evocative of personal memory.

But it is in the Ukraine portion of the narrative that the autobiographical nature of *Bloodlines* becomes most pronounced: the eastern-most country she visits, it is also the country in which she is most personally invested.¹² Fittingly, Ukraine represents the furthest point that she reaches, both literally and emotionally, during her journeys “into” Eastern Europe. Admitting that “for a Ukrainian Canadian Ukraine is not a country like other countries” because “[e]verything about it is ‘loaded,’ freighted with meaning” (168), Kostash is not unaware of the shift in attitude that her ancestral homeland brings about in her. Family stories and childhood memories appear more frequently in this chapter than in any other: writing about Cossack history, she remembers being ten years old and seeing pictures of “*these funny men*” who “*live in some never-never land, east of the sunrise, without children, without women... in an exotic summer camp that is both dangerous (all those swords) and entertaining (the belly laughs)*” (224). Later, still riffing on the Cossack motif, she recalls folk dancing in a church basement: “*girls in a line at the very back, mincing girlishly with little pointy steps and holding our hands coquettishly; the boys doing a Cossack dance*” (229). And as she prepares to meet her family members in Ukraine, reflections on Taras Shevchenko, national poet of Ukraine, become entwined with thoughts about family history (“when Taras imagined a free Ukraine, he never imagined someone like me: granddaughter of a Ukrainian peon upended from the ‘eternal’ village and cast upon the North American plain to breed a second generation of Anglophones practising professions in the cities” [233]). Importantly, too, Kostash leaves readers with a description of her final trip to Ukraine that includes images of wheat and bread, both sacred in Ukrainian culture, which are linked to the future and invoked as symbols of optimism. She notes that the “Ukrainian lands seen from the air in June are green, green, and green again”; from the country’s black loam spring “the beginnings of bread” (249). Less an ending than a new beginning – and very much in keeping with the autobiographical nature of the text (since, of course, the author’s “life story” is far from complete) – *Bloodlines*’ conclusion suggests that Kostash has at last, in Ukraine, planted the seeds for an ongoing relationship with and connection to Eastern Europe.

Ultimately, because *Bloodlines* borrows conventions from the travelogue tradition, historical scholarship, journalistic writing, and autobiography, the genre of the text can be labelled (for lack of a more precise phrase) as “mostly non-fiction”: that is to say, while its form is clearly hybrid, the book exclusively hybridizes non-fictional genres and therefore presents itself as

a representation of reality. To be sure, readers cannot ignore the active, not to mention artful, role that Kostash plays in shaping the narrative; trained as we are to recognize that the author always mediates between the “real” world and her construction of it, we are necessarily skeptical about the fullness, accuracy, and reliability of Kostash’s writing. But at the same time, as Laurie McNeill argues, “life writing requires a level of generic buy-in” (McNeill xv). By omitting elements that we would recognize as belonging to the realm of fiction (an invented and clearly discernible plot, an invented and fully developed cast of characters), Kostash asks and expects us to “buy into” *Bloodlines* as a “true” story, or a series of “true” stories. This, for her – if we revisit the subtitle of her *Quill and Quire* article (“Why the ‘creative non-fiction’ label obscures the real value of true stories about the world”) – is both the function and value of “non-fiction”: it tells the “truth” in a way that a more fictional genre cannot. If we recall, too, Kostash’s suggestion that “non-fiction” involves “lobbing arguments into the public square” (“In Praise” 14), we begin to see that all of her generic choices are intended to support a single “argument” about the relation between her “self,” as a second-generation Ukrainian Canadian especially, and the “other” world from which her grandparents emigrated. Kostash wants to show readers that, despite being born and raised in Canada and despite continuing to make her home there as an adult, she also belongs in Eastern Europe

At a glance, this reading of the text might appear to contradict arguments advanced by other scholars. Kamboureli, for example, says that “the trope of self-representation is employed in order to... question authenticity” (167); *Bloodlines*, she says, “does not posit the history it examines in the shape of a historical continuum that has an identifiable origin” (169). Because Kostash “approaches the sites of her study not as stable historical grounds that will easily fit within the ideological matrix of her values, but as spaces that are inherently fluid and therefore capable of challenging her assumptions about them as well as about her own subjectivity,” *Bloodlines* “lacks a thesis that has to be proven true” (169). In a similar vein, Kröller notes that the text “constantly challenges its own assertions” as Kostash “frequently questions her own readings” of her experiences in Eastern Europe (358). And in a previous analysis of the book I suggest that *Bloodlines* is less about finding or coming home than about the “open-ended, perpetual search for home” (Grekul 201). We all conclude, in other words, that after journeying “into” Eastern Europe, Kostash feels no less ambivalent about

her relation to this part of the world, no less confused about why she is attached to it or whether she has a right to call it “home.”

Vijay Agnew argues in her introduction to *Diaspora, Memory, and Identity: A Search for Home* (2005) that “the individual living in the diaspora experiences a dynamic tension every day between living ‘here’ and remembering ‘there,’ between memories of places of origin and entanglements with places of residence, and between the metaphorical and physical home” (Agnew 4). Salman Rushdie, in *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), argues that diasporic writers are “haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt” (10). But he insists too that “if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation from [the homeland] almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost”: we will, in short, “create fictions, not actual cities or village, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands” (10).¹³ Stuart Hall makes a similar point in “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (2003) when he says that the past is “always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth” (237). In diasporic texts, according to Hall, images of “*imaginary* reunification” offer a “way of imposing an *imaginary* coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation, which is the history of all enforced diasporas” (235, my emphasis). The imagination, in other words, is a necessary component of the diasporic writer’s repertoire.

Kostash’s desire to impose “imaginary coherence” on her experience of diaspora is nowhere more evident than at a turning point, late in the text, where she recognizes and embraces her origins. The revelation happens during a conversation that she has with Ukrainian dissident Leonid Pliushch (Kostash, *Bloodlines* 189). After listening to him speak at a public meeting in Edmonton, Kostash asks Pliushch, “How is it that, although we come from opposite ends of the world and we do not speak each other’s language and I cannot begin to imagine your experience, still I feel close to you?” Pliushch replies, “Because, in the end, we come from the same village” (190). Looking back on his words, midway through her chapter on Ukraine, Kostash says, “[s]o there it finally was: the Ukrainians and I: kin” (190) – and, near the end of the book, returning the metaphor of “the village,” she says, “I’ve been to the village. It lives, and it is ours” (233). A place that cannot be found on a map and that exists outside of time, “the village” becomes the originary site at which all of Ukraine’s history collapses. For Kostash to identify “the village” as the point of common origins for all Ukrainians is

not only to lay claim to the collective past of the Ukrainian people but to reconstruct her “self” as part of Ukraine’s present and future (since the village “*lives*,” not *lived*, and it is “*ours*,” not *theirs*). And yet because this epiphany hinges entirely on Kostash’s ability to *imagine* the village, it reinforces the notion that diasporic identity is just that – a function of the imagination.

The epiphany further underscores the fictional function of Kostash’s narrative about her journey “into” Eastern Europe. Although she actually heard Pliushch speak in 1977, long before she began traveling to Eastern Europe, she waits until her chapter on “Ukraine” to share her thoughts on “the village,” framing the better portion of the text as build-up to this important moment. So *Bloodlines*, from the start, takes the shape of a quest whose details are, in a sense, irrelevant. Where she actually travels matters little, since – long before she set out – she had an imaginary destination in mind. The experiences she chooses to narrate in the text matter even less, given that the outcome of her journey “into” Eastern Europe was determined some fifteen years before she published the text (“the Ukrainians and I: kin” [190]). And so the “true” story of Kostash’s experiences in Eastern Europe both begins and ends with a fiction: in choosing not to narrate her return to Canada in the final pages of *Bloodlines* – remaining instead, narratively speaking, in Ukraine – Kostash asks readers to believe that she continues to reside in the village, a place that no longer exists, if it ever did. The village “lives” only in her imagination; to believe that she has found the village, readers must acknowledge the inherently creative aspects of her diasporic identity.

It is how she expresses here ethnicity within the genre that offers an answer to how that genre may be categorized. That genre matters to Kostash is obvious from her rallying cry to other “non-fiction” writers (“it’s time we reclaimed our origins” [“In praise” 14]), and genre should matter to readers too because, as McNeill argues, we “need to ‘pin down,’ to name, what we read or watch or hear, in order to comprehend the work these texts do” (xiii). But Kostash’s call for her work to be categorized as “non-fiction” ultimately says as much about her desire to reclaim *ethnic* origins than it does about the journalistic roots of her craft. Referring to *Bloodlines* as “non-fiction” becomes, for the author, an act of wish-fulfillment; as readers, however, we need a different generic label, one that helps us gain firmer interpretive ground in terms of understanding the actual function and the real value of the text. Kostash was right the first time – right, that is, when

she championed “*creative non-fiction*,” a term whose “fuzziness” more accurately describes the “fuzzy” and fraught nature of living, literally, in one world and, figuratively, between two. Her story, as she tells it in *Bloodlines*, is at once “true” and not true, “real” and not real: to call it “non-fiction” is to miss the ways in which its creative elements enable Kostash to redefine identity, reconstitute community, and re-imagine home. To inhabit “the village,” she must first invent it; to transcend the limitations of reality, she must – and does – embrace the transformative power of the fictional.

NOTES

1. On March 11, 2004, for example, at the University of Calgary (Nickle Arts Museum), Kostash gave a public reading entitled “From Two Hills to Byzantium: A Journey in Creative Non-fiction.” In 2004, at the Banff Centre, and in 2005, at the University of Alberta, she taught workshops focused on creative non-fiction.
2. Her cohort of like-minded creative non-fiction writers includes Erna Paris, Susan Crean, Marni Jackson, Gordon Laird, Stan Persky, and Brian Fawcett, to name a few (Kostash “Crisis” 25).
3. See the following website for more information on the Edna Staebler Award: <library.wlu.ca/internet/prizes/staebler.html>. See, too, Creative Nonfiction’s website at <<http://www.creativenonfiction.org/thejournal/whatisconf.htm>>. The special issue of *Women’s Studies* is 33:6 (2004).
4. In “Genreing: A Personal, Autocritical, Confessional essay” (2005), Helen M. Buss refers to creative non-fiction writers as “almost an oppressed minority given the dominance of the NOVEL as the most honoured art form in [Canada]” (144).
5. While Kostash’s books are often reviewed, little scholarly work has been done on them. For example, only three scholars (Smaro Kamboureli, Eva-Marie Kröller, and I) have worked on *Bloodlines*, though it was published almost fifteen years ago.
6. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur point out that, “[i]n the last decade, theorizations of diaspora have emerged in area studies, ethnic studies, and cultural studies as a major site of contestation.” They caution against using the term as a “catch-all phrase to speak of and for all movements, however privileged, and for all dislocations, even symbolic ones,” because “some forms of travel are tourism” (3). My assumption is that Kostash explores her diasporic identity in *Bloodlines*: she does not travel as a tourist but rather as a member of an ethnic community whose history has been shaped by “reluctant scattering” (Gilroy 123). As a Ukrainian Canadian, Kostash shares with other diasporic Ukrainians “a history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland... desire for eventual return... and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship” (Safran, paraphrased in Clifford 247). James Clifford’s relatively broad definition of diaspora is instructive here: he suggests that the term encompasses “a whole range of phenomena that encourage multi-locale attachments, and dwelling and traveling within and across nations” (249).

7. As I have argued in *Leaving Shadows* (169–92), *The Doomed Bridegroom* radically blurs the distinction between what is “real” and what is “imagined,” making it easy (too easy) prey for the critic who wants to resist categorizing it as “non-fiction.” In this text, I have said, “Kostash allows herself the freedom to explore – formally as well as thematically – how her long-term obsession with Eastern and Southern Europe has been defined by the inextricability of reality and fantasy” (172). Indeed, as she narrates her affairs with six “lovers” (one of whom she never met), Kostash embraces “the role of the storyteller, whose imagination is as limitless as it is lively” (172).
8. The original citation, in McNeill’s essay, is Miller 151.
9. The original citation is Medway 141.
10. The original citation is Medway 123.
11. Kröller argues that “[u]p-to-date maps are indispensable in travel books about Eastern Europe, given the numerous and extensive territorial changes in the area” (359), so the map that Kostash provides can be read not only as a device that lends scholarly weight to the text but also as a convention of the travelogue genre.
12. See my discussion of *Bloodlines* in *Leaving Shadows: Literature in English by Canada’s Ukrainians* (2005).
13. The original reads “our physical alienation from India,” as Rushdie is writing specifically about diasporic Indian writers, but because his point is applicable to all diasporic writers, I have replaced “India” with “homeland.”

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