

Community Voices

The Canadian Quilt: Images of Us in Small Squares

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INTRODUCTION

We define ourselves through our language, culture, gender and history. As a woman and immigrant, I have lived inside and outside the distinct cultures and languages of both my home and the outside world. However, as a writer, my life on the doorstep of these languages and cultures has been fraught with political, cultural, social, as well as pedagogical consequences.

Female born, I have been told that there is a symbiotic relationship between mother and child that paternal bonds can't transgress. As female born, I have been shown that there are certain political, social and conventional boundaries to which I am confined. To language born, I understand that linguistic ties are bred by social constructs and then borrowed for political gain. In country born, and then displaced, I am witness to my parent's resistance, indeed, defiance of my "other" identity.

I am female. I have no mother-tongue in the conventional sense of the word. I have lived in the epicentre of a bilingual community within a trilingual family from a unicultural background. My tongue speaks the language of others. My mind, however, directs the hand to write in only one. From this piecemeal identity has emerged a visceral struggle to make some sense of the colliding cultures in which I have lived.

My relationship to the written word is a reflection of this struggle and of my efforts to find a literal and metaphorical "homeplace" (hooks 1991) for my Self and my knowing. The theoretical

tensions, shifts and conflicts that weave through my writing reflect the schisms inherent in the meaning-making process when identity, culture and language clash.

WRITING AND PIECING

Writing has been my strategy for survival. I have followed the winding path of the narrative because it yields an understanding of the kinetic nature of my journey. The use of narratives elucidates the meanings of experiences in a way which, to quote Eisner (1991, 2) "reveal(s) what, paradoxically, words can never say." The stories have allowed me to stake my position freely, firmly, regardless of the language and culture, or time and space in which I am immersed. In story, I can transcend these limitations.

According to Van Manen (1990, 3), the writing of one's life story becomes the "conscious" and "purposeful" creation of tools or "objects of meaning that are expressions of how human beings exist in the world." As a female writer, I searched for the key to escape from the traditional form of life writing and found it in women's creative traditions of quilting. In the piecing process of quilting, as in the writing process, a woman's life is framed by the texture and complexity of the everyday experience. Meaning is revealed in the details and sacredness of the mundane. The process is one of documentation.

Virginia Woolf observed that, "Often nothing tangible remains of a woman's day. The food that has been cooked is eaten; the children that

have been nursed have gone out into the world " (Cameron 1998, 50). Yet, the particularity of women's lives is that we choose to elaborate instruments that testify to the ordinary life rather than build monuments as reminders of exemplary ones. The following narrative is such an instrument. In it, life, language and text interweave. The metaphor of the quilt best reflects how my experience of becoming Canadian remains a never-ending and ever-shifting process of piecing. It is a process that examines the common experience as well as the communion of experience. As Showalter (1991) explains, "Piecing is thus an art of making do and eking out, an art of ingenuity, and conservation. It reflects the fragmentation of women's time, the scrapiness and uncertainty of women's creative or solitary moments" (149).

That I've become an expert in the art of "making do" doesn't surprise me. I learned this from my mother who would hurry home from her evening job of scrubbing toilets at the Royal Vic to her night job of assembling pieces of patterned garments on her old sewing machine. I learned that this was the only quiet time of her whole day. And as I plucked the threads from the carpet each morning, I promised myself that I would not be like my mother.

However, not unlike like my mother, I too have had to make difficult decisions which impact the cultural and linguistic relationship I have with my children. As an English-educated Quebecker married to a French Canadian, the decision of whether to send my children to English or French schools will have far historical and cultural implications. Indeed, by choosing a French school for my own children, I forfeit my future grandchildren's right to an English education. I am cautious and fearful, sad and angry for I know firsthand how the underbelly of cultural mismatches cuts through the fabric of family.

My purpose in these pages is to add to an understanding of what it means to be an immigrant woman - in this time and in this place. I propose it as a glimpse of the historical implications of our daily lives. But mostly, I offer the following as an example of how my "Canadian" identity was and still remains tied to the written word - of how

"becoming" Canadian has always meant writing as a Canadian. Perhaps, because the worlds outside the home have differed so much from those inside the home, I've had to "make do" by filling the cultural void with my own perceptions and experiences.

I am reminded of this as I sit here at the kitchen table trying to assemble the pieces of writing that follow. I am tired after a long day of teaching, hours of correcting papers and an evening of research work for my thesis. I suppose I am my mother's daughter after all.

Square One: LIFE

Canadians are a strange lot. I remember sensing this as a child, laying in the back seat of my father's 1966 Plymouth on our flee from the crisp Manitoba winters to what my parents imagined was the kinder, more embracing climate of Montreal. I lay there watching how the endless stream of telephone poles stood like needles threading the landscape together with long, uneven seams of weighty wiring. The wispy tips of the flat, golden land stretched up to catch the colours of the sky before they seeped into the soil.

I couldn't understand why my parents wanted to leave the place where our neighbours would hang out their long underwear in the winter until they froze like beads of headless gingerbread men, or why they wanted to leave the nice Ukrainian lady whose house and flowered dress smelled like pasty yeast and sourdough. I did though once hear my father telling my mother about something called opportunity in the place where we were going. What that was and how I would recognize it when we got there was a source of pickled wonderment that sustained me throughout the long journey.

The sense of bewilderment and grandeur, of flight and hope, that this trip inspired in me as a child remains deep in the flesh of my consciousness as a Canadian. Over the years, I have tried to explain this feeling of rootedness, of belonging, of home, to my parents. As Greek immigrants, my parents came to this country thinking that their children, like seedlings planted by their own hands, could be sown and could grow and prosper without

taking steadfast root in the depth of the unyielding Canadian soil. They hadn't counted on their children being transformed by the climate, environment, and culture. And they understood the recognition and protection of their children's desire to be called Canadian only as a rejection of their Greek origins. But origin, as I explained to my mother, is where I can trace and map, know and recognize people and places that I have shaped and that I have been shaped by. Yes, I am Greek by birth and circumstance but I am also Canadian in mind and heart.

Square Two: LANGUAGE

In my younger years, being Canadian meant going to school with Olga, a lanky blond Russian friend whose aging aunt would let us play in the attic with her trunkful of old fancy dresses, silly hats and fox fur stoles that she had managed to flee with from her country. It also meant living in a housing project in downtown Montreal with Portugese, Chinese, Irish, French Canadian and Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox neighbours. There were so many different holidays to celebrate.

During my adolescent years, it meant hanging out with the Greek, Chinese and Armenian crowd and having different shades of white, black, brown, and pink friends. It meant spending spring and autumn days skipping class at the High School of Montreal, and lounging on the grassy green McGill campus. It meant knowing swear words in each language.

Now, as an adult, my claim to a Canadian identity is a bit shaky, almost fragile. I claim it in writing if not in speech. Quite often someone, probably detecting my accent, tells me, "you're not Canadian, are you?" Which despite my many years in this country I interpret as "You're not one of us. Which one of them are you?" My response is usually hesitant. Where to begin? For to define who I am in terms of language and culture I must travel to the tip of my selfhood and back. Indeed, where my parents' culture once leaked into mine there is now a chasm of difference as wide as the ocean we once travelled.

In fact, though my parents were Greek my

languages have never been theirs and theirs has never truly been mine. Growing up, I saw my parents and their Greek language and community as separate from mine. So different, not only in speech but in traditions and habits of the mind and heart. The languages which I spoke outside the home always differed from those spoken inside the home. The "outside" languages cut an incision deep enough through the delicate fabric of the "home" language that it soon unravelled from misuse and neglect. The tattered remnants of the first language my parents lent me reflected the linguistic and cultural separation between home and the outside world, heritage and citizenship, past and future, insider and outsider. It remained severed.

I never fully acquired my parents' language because under the circumstances it did not, could not, fulfill my need for self-expression. My Greek language served a limited functional purpose - to get along. Nowhere was this void of cultural and linguistic misunderstanding as clear as at family gatherings.

Square Three: STORY

Indeed, the Greek culture is a sensual culture; one in which music and dance, wine and food, story and song are rooted in a sense of history that engage both the memory and the senses. I remember these events as lively affairs, with much food and drink, laughter and dance. As a child, there were three things I could count on for entertainment at these celebrations: one was the traditional male dance that included the crashing of dishes, the balancing of chairs and the throwing of money; the second was my uncle George's habit of dancing on the table in a drunken stupor while literally crying for his homeland. However, the third was truly my favourite.

As the party would wind down and distant relatives and friends would leave, my aunts would gather around the dining room table and talk far into the night. I could sit cross-legged under that table for hours without tiring. There was something very special, something exquisitely serene, about being able to sit there, in the centre of the universe, unseen. I would sometimes press my face against

the surrounding lace tablecloth and imagine it to be my veil. Othertimes, the curves and folds of the cloth I imagined to be the curtains of my own theatre.

I loved that time. It was a quiet time. My aunts didn't speak very loudly. Sometimes they whispered. At times, I could barely make out what they were saying. But I learned to pace myself, to make meaning from the tone of the words as much as from the words themselves. I liked to sit close to my Aunt Kaliope. She was the wealthiest of my aunts. Among the mounds of coats piled in the bedroom that I would fall asleep on, hers was definitely the one that smelled the best. From my place under the table, I could recognise her swollen feet in the tiny black patent shoes that were a size and a half too small but which she insisted on wearing.

Kaliope was my favourite storyteller. She had a way of using cuss words that didn't seem to offend the others. My mother, of course, never swore in Greek. But she did, from time to time, use English words. My mother explained that this really didn't matter because God, being Greek and all, couldn't understand. I believed her.

I could tell when my Aunt Kaliope was going to begin a particularly interesting story because she would wiggle from side to side on the chair as she tried to cross her pudgy legs. Her heels barely touched the floor. I also recognised some of my other aunts' reactions to Kaliope's stories by their shifting, shuffling or ankle scratching. I knew that my Aunts Dina and Sophie resented Kaliope because they would constantly give each other a kick or nudge on the leg every time she began to speak. I learned so much from the stories I heard under that table. Stories I might otherwise never have come to know.

I learned that my paternal grandmother had not really died of stomach cancer at fifty-five. Rather, she had died of a punctured heart; a condition induced by the suffering she had endured during wartime and which had slowly drained the love and life from her body. My grandmother, a young girl at the time, had lost her family, including her parents and brothers to the war. She had fled a burning Constantinople with her three

year-old sister in tow. But in the confusion and chaos of one fateful second, she had allowed her sister's tiny hand to slip away. The hole in her heart never healed.

I learned that my maternal grandfather's hair had turned a snowy white overnight when at the age of sixty and after fathering four daughters, his year-old son died of pneumonia. I also learned that following my mother's birth a year later, the talk among the midwives had been of ways to rid the family of this girl child. I learned that my father was called a refugee and that my maternal grandparents, Athenians, were devastated when they heard of their daughter's courtship with a refugee. This did, however, explain why my mother told us that the "refugees" rather than the "bogeyman" would catch us if we played outside after dark.

There was also always talk of the return: to the homeland, to the family, to the vineyards, to the olive and lemon groves, to the warmth, to the water. This talk was always about a time and a place when we would not be where we were. But I loved where I was. And the more my parents tried to pull me from the soil, the more deeply and steadfast did my roots spread into the earth.

Square Four: THE JOURNEY

Of course, my parents had come to the new world with the drive and ardour of conquerors, imagining that nothing of their past would need to be conceded in exchange for fulfillment of their expectations for prosperity and their visions of cultural and linguistic security. Their possessions had been meager. Each piece of luggage had been tied securely enough so as to avoid any shifting or disturbance of their contents. Yet, as part and parcel of their possessions carried over to this new world, I was bound to their past though barely hinged to their language and ways.

My parents had always maintained that our stay in Canada was to be temporary; the length solely dependant on zeal and swiftness, on obtaining the financial independence that could be shuttled back to their country of origin. Never had they imagined that the frost and cold bite of

Manitoba's winters or the loneliness of the vast prairies could be a place of enchantment and wonder for any of their children.

My parents' memories of these places have been harmed by the harshness of the elements and the isolation they felt in the country's vastness. My memories, on the other hand, have been fed on the rapeseed and barley, the triticale, tame hay and flax. I harvest childhood memories of Manitoba's late summer's acres, ablaze with yellow sunflowers. I remember tales woven and written about frozen river banks, melting snowmen and haunted barns. I have kept a great many of these stories secretly hidden on sheafs of stained and ivory paper. Returning to these stories is like returning home.

Square Five : ARE WE THERE YET ?

Of course, little of what I learned "under" the dining room table over the years could have really prepared me for the lessons learned "over" the dining room table. I especially learned that Greek immigrant women flocked together seeking refuge, strength and protection in the matrix of their cultural and linguistic affinities. The women believed that in protecting their flock from the impurities of other outside cultures, their tribal commitments would be honoured and upheld, that their children would do as they had done, that their children would be as they had been, that the future would be fashioned by their past - as theirs had been. I often felt a hostage of their past, captive of an unknown world and time.

In fact, what my family considered as a means of protecting their Greek culture, I saw as instances of betrayal of my Canadian culture and therefore myself. Growing up, I began to reject the culture, the language, the religion, the men. I rejected the decorum and tradition of the Greek Orthodox church and opted for the singing and wailing of my friend Cathy's Baptist church. I skipped Greek school and picked up French instead. I rebuffed the advances of Greek boys at school, never attended community dances and avoided men altogether at weddings and baptisms. As I saw it, the price of a true Greek identity, as my family defined it, was too steep.

Indeed, I was proud of my Greek ancestry and wore it like a brooch on my Canadian coat. But I was neck-deep in Canada. I could feel it under my feet and behind my back. I could feel it pushing against my breasts and pressing at my fingers. I grew up in Canada and somehow Canada had grown in me. My mother still struggles to understand why, regardless of how hard she tried, she was unable to shake the rusty coloured earth from the long, strong Canadian roots I had grown. Perhaps the problem was that she tried too hard.

Square Six: HOME

I heard that Olga now lives in the Maritimes and that some other friends have moved to Alberta and Ontario. Though I have lost touch with them, I recognize them and myself in other Canadians that I meet on the streets and subways, at work and at the corner store. We eat each other's food, we speak chunks of each other's language and know of each other's rituals, traditions and celebrations. Some of us have dared to take partners outside our respective cultures. We're easily recognizable. We are the circle of strangers that have attached ourselves to the ever winding spiral of cultural forces that unites Canadians to Canada.

For me, being Canadian today isn't much different than it was before. I've always had to define who I am by first explaining who I am not.

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