

Black Star North

Ron Sakolsky

2005

“A single star weds the space between two branches.”

– George Elliott Clarke in Québecité

Lately, I have chosen to do my living, loving, writing, and resisting in British Columbia (BC) Canada. Though I can't say that I'm an ex-patriot, since I have always despised patriotism; I am currently an expatriate. Canada has long been a destination of choice for American political dissidents like myself, and for such refugees from US oppression as the enslaved Africans who followed the North Star to the last stop on the Underground Railroad (though slavery was by no means illegal in Canada). In 2000, the now deceased African American surrealist poet, Ted Joans, put a new wrinkle on that maroon tradition by swearing that he would move to Canada if George W. Bush became President. Immediately after the election, he moved to Vancouver. For a variety of reasons, in 2002, I followed his ambulatory example by moving to one of the Northern Gulf Islands (which are located in the Strait of Georgia between the West Coast of the Canadian mainland Vancouver Island). Finally fed up, I had escaped the belly of the beast to seek sanctuary on Denman Island.

And now in 2005, with Bush gloating over the prospect of having a second term to spend his newly minted political capital, the tramp Northwards grows daily. It seemed that for about a month after last year's American presidential sweepstakes, there was a weekly feature story in the mainstream Canadian press on the “Reverse Brain Drain” or the burgeoning “Gay Exodus” or the “Liberal Flight” North.

As an anarchist in voluntary exile, I've never looked back. What's hardest about being an expatriate though is that many people here, especially other expats, assume that I am uncritical of Canada and even want to become a citizen. Actually, I prefer Canada to the US with the same wariness that makes me prefer a good cop to a bad cop, never forgetting that both the good and bad cop are often part of the same police state entrapment scenario and neither should be trusted with your liberty. Though I am now considered a “permanent resident” of Canada, I have no interest in becoming a Canadian citizen or swearing allegiance to the English queen in order to do so. I am acutely aware of the fact that Queen Elizabeth is not only despicable because she is the embodiment of colonial monarchy, but that her official status is especially irksome in Canada given the intensity of the cultural ties that link Quebec to the Francophone diaspora. The ubiquitous appearance of the queen on Canadian currency and in every post office in the nation exposes the hypocritical lie of self-righteous Canadian shibboleths like “cultural diversity” and “multiculturalism,” even in reference to the so-called “founding nations” from Europe.

That I am already considered a citizen of one country is more than enough of an imposition on my freedom as far as I'm concerned. Instead of defining myself in statist terms, let's just say that the borderless rainforested bioregion of Cascadia (which defiantly oozes across the officially designated boundaries of the Northwestern US and the West Coast of Canada) feels more like home than anywhere else I've ever lived. When I was first asked by Fifth Estate to write an expatriate piece shortly after I arrived in Canada, I felt that it was premature. After having lived here for a few years though, it seems that I can now reflect on that experience with some perspective. So here's my “letter home.”

For starters, I am very aware that I am living on stolen land. Radical folks in these parts often paraphrase the Canadian national anthem's bromide of "my home and native land" by substituting the more revealing: "my home on Native land." Much of BC still remains unceded and Indigenous title to the land has never been extinguished. As I write this piece, Native resistance to Canada is very much in evidence across the province with long and short term land occupations emphasizing decolonization and self-determination stretching from Sutikalh (St'at'imc territory) or, in colonial terms, Melvin Creek to Skwelkwek'welt (Shuswap territory) or, as the ski resort-minded settlers have renamed it, Sun Peaks. Given the context of the ongoing low intensity warfare against Aboriginal peoples in Canada, such Indigenous acts of rebellion and resistance to the onslaught of colonialism, resource industry extraction, tourism and gentrification are ironically considered to be trespassing by the Canadian government and therefore subject to suppression by the State. As always since the original European invasion, the struggle for land and liberty continues unabated.

The picture I paint here is not that of maverick filmmaker Michael Moore's sanitized and romanticized version of Canada which he frequently uses as a dramatic foil in opposition to the US propaganda machine's version of America the Beautiful. On the most basic level, many Canadians have never examined their own complicity in genocide against the Native population or their privileged position in the American Empire, and smugly take pride in Moore's idealization of Canada. Such left-liberal American cultural products as "Bowling for Columbine" are problematic when seen in a Canadian context because they readily lend themselves to a self-congratulatory sense of historical denial on the part of the viewing audience. Even the much ballyhooed Canadian health care system is racked with class inequity, and its threadbare integrity is increasingly threatened by the prospect of corporate privatization.

However, Canadians generally seem to me to be less arrogant than their US counterparts in relation to world politics. Canadians, for the most part, don't grow up thinking that their country is the center of the universe or that they are the toughest kid on the global block in the way that most Americans do. This is not to say that Canada is idyllic.

Domestically, white supremacy continues to rear its ugly head across the country with a constant flow of cases of police brutality against Native peoples and urbanized people of color in general. Moreover, there exists a virulent strain of racism against Asians that, after a series of anti-Chinese race riots on the West Coast in the 1880s and 1890s, culminated in the internment of Canadians of Japanese ancestry during World War II in the BC interior, and still lurks beneath the surface of the Pacific Rim prosperity of Western Canada. In the BC interior, 1995's Battle of Ts'Peten (Gustafsen Lake) is emblematic of the deep-seated nature of racism employed against those the Canadian government loves to patronizingly label as "First Nations" peoples, which ranges from the now defunct assimilationist residential schools designed to eradicate Native culture to land grabs which imply the threat of armed combat as the ultimate enforcement tactic. The crisis situation there erupted around the Indigenous defence of the freedom to hold sun dance ceremonies on disputed lands that are traditional Secwepemc territory. It ended in a standoff against the biggest mobilization of Canadian military forces since the crushing of Louis Riel and the Metis resistance in 1885. In fact, what is now an institutionalized national symbol, the Mounties or Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), was itself originally created as a quasi-military police force in that same nineteenth century war to appropriate Metis land resources.

Yet, on the global stage, Canadians are typically reluctant to see themselves as the cops of the world. They often have to be cajoled or threatened by the Colossus of the South to join its imperial wars or else face economic sanctions and a loss of their privileged status in the New World Order. However, sometimes the Canadian government does refuse to send in combatants, as was the case in Iraq. In that instance, however, they are still deeply implicated in the war in that the presence of Canadian support troops stationed in Afghanistan to "rebuild" that country not so coincidentally frees US troops to be used in an attempt to pacify and occupy Iraq and to enhance the financial gains made by Canadian weapons manufacturers during the war. Revealingly, Canada, with an eye toward post-election contracts, has now assumed a leadership role in monitoring the upcoming Iraqi election as a key collaborator in the US-led propaganda war to redefine the Bush regime's act of blatant aggression and occupation as liberation.

Though the preferred Canadian self-image is that of international peacemaker in contrast to their belligerent neighbors south of the border, in fact, they are in bed with American foreign policy operatives in matters at home ranging from their joint military operation, NORAD (North American Aerospace Defence Command) to the latest

scheme for a “son-of-Star Wars” missile defense shield system. Furthermore, these two governments engage in joint immigration clampdowns aimed at harassing, detaining and arresting those who are labeled as potential terrorists. A case in point is that of Maher Arar, a Syrian-born Canadian citizen deported in the wake of 9–11 hysteria by US officials at JFK airport in New York after returning from a personal trip to Tunisia in 2002, and sent not back to Canada but rather to be tortured in a Syrian prison with the secret complicity of the Canadian government. Beyond deportation, from the case of the American Indian Movement’s Leonard Peltier in 1976 to the John Graham case (in relation to Anna Mae Pictou Aquash) today and the recent capture of “environmental terrorist” Tre Arrow in BC, extradition agreements between Canada and the US have long been a stealth weapon used against domestic radicals criminalized by the American government.

Of course, Canada has in the recent past been a haven for US citizens of draft age fleeing colonial wars, most notably the Vietnam War, when large numbers of draft refusers converged on Canada. As the Flying Burrito Brothers once put it in “My Uncle,” a seminal song from that era, “I’m headin’ for the nearest foreign border/Vancouver may be just my kind of town/Cause they don’t need the kind of law and order/That tends to keep a good man underground.” As recently as 2004, the festering controversy over these Vietnam era draft dodgers resurfaced when a public monument to them slated to be built in Nelson, BC came under attack by the Bushies during the American election campaign.

And history seems to be repeating itself. These days, Canadians talk about the latest exodus from the USA to Canada as the “second wave.” Military deserters are already seeking asylum here and can be seen barnstorming around Canada with their anti-Iraq war message. Like the draft resisters of the Sixties, this new breed of refugees are often seeking to escape their entrapment in the “poverty draft” which is the foundation of the current “volunteer” army. Predictably, their numbers are likely to increase if the war continues to expand, and especially if full-on conscription is once again put into effect. Even now, pre-emptive plans are in the works for tough new high tech monitoring devices at the border requested by US warmakers in order to impede the expected flight of draft resisters to Canada.

As for me, long past draft age, I’m more a refugee from the battles of the culture wars that have ravaged the US psyche and provided fertile ground for that miserabilist brand of fascist Fortress America fundamentalism now being marketed as the “war on terrorism.” As a radical looking at the US from afar, I’m elated by both the growing anti-war/global liberation movements and the increasing efforts to disrupt the social peace. Perhaps if I were a bit younger with legs that could still outrun the cops, and my partner wasn’t Canadian-born, I might have stayed Stateside to fight the good fight in the churning belly of the imperial beast.

While I still am engaged in that struggle in a variety of ways from my Northern vantage point; lately, my political action, research and writing have taken a decidedly Canadian turn. All of a sudden, I want to know as much as I can about radical Canadian history, from the bold decisiveness of the Vancouver 5/Direct Action in the Eighties to the more recent Carnival Against Capitalism during Quebec City’s anti-globalization protests in relation to the Summit of the Americas meeting there in the Spring of 2001. My interests range from historical accounts of the Tolstoyian Doukhobor war resisters and property burners who arrived in the Kootenay area of BC from Russia just after the turn of the twentieth century to past utopian experiments in the Gulf Islands to the Mohawk warriors at Kanesatake (Oka, Quebec) who, in 1990, defended traditional burial grounds against the expansion of a golf course and, from there, to the Mikmaq defenders in Burnt Church (New Brunswick) who took direct action in relation to upholding their traditional rights of lobstering and fishing as recently as 2000. And, of course, the mass civil disobedience and active resistance campaigns in relation to the threatened clearcutting of the ancient old growth rainforests of Clayoquot Sound in BC during the summer of 1993, which included several of my present brother/sister islanders here on Denman. (These are just a few of the things that you never learn about Canada in the States if you learn about Canada at all). And last year I reveled in the sprawling splendor of Montreal’s Anarchist Book Fair, whose parallel three week long Festival of Anarchy makes it the largest of such book fair events in North America, in conjunction with which I did a workshop on the history of anarcho-surrealism in Canada.

Similarly, my current anti-authoritarian focus is a local one. Today, you’ll find me rolling up my sleeves on Denman Island, helping to put on the annual anarchist gathering here or doing my part to foment opposition to development and gentrification threats and for island autonomy in solidarity with Native sovereignty. Moreover, lots of juicy creative projects keep life here in the Comox Valley exciting, from helping to set up a free radio station

to originating a new anarchist zine, named *The Oystercatcher*, to being a founding member of an improvisational sound collage trio which experiments with layers of “bootlegged” recorded music in a surrealist fashion. And this year, I’m putting together a book which is a collection of my own writings since the year 2000 to be called, *Creating Anarchy*. As I approach 60 years of age, I take guidance from the sage words of the late George Woodcock, another anarchist expatriate of sorts who lived out the last part of his life in BC. As he put it so well, “I catch myself feeling glad I’m young in an aging body, hoping I’ll experience everything intensely to the end” (Woodcock, *Taking It To The Letter*, 1981).

– Denman Island

New Years Day, 2005

Note: *Black Star North* was the original name of the zine, now called *Communicating Vessels*, where I first heard of the land of Minus Tides where I now reside.

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