

Encouraging an AlterNative Citizenship

By Alice den Otter

On Thursday February 15, Professor Linda Rodenburg gave an inspiring lecture on “AlterNative Citizenship: Re/placing the ‘Native’ in Relation to Canadian Multiculturalism.” Beginning with a brief overview of her involvement in Orillia, culminating in a video clip of her polar bear dip into the ice water of Lake Couchiching the previous Sunday, this brave professor invited her audience to be immersed in the community, to get involved in the place where we live, to interact as citizens of this country.

Crucial to Canadian citizenship is multiculturalism, one of the top three concepts defining Canada for most Canadian youths. Looking at the official Canadian multiculturalism website, Professor Rodenburg noted its utopian representations, including the statement by the Ministry of Heritage, that “Through multiculturalism, Canada recognizes the potential of all Canadians, encouraging them to integrate into their society and take an active part in its social, cultural, economic and political affairs.” While applauding the notions of integration and active participation, Rodenburg nevertheless cautioned the audience that integration can seem like assimilation and that active participation is often on the terms of dominant culture.

In historical terms, multiculturalism was recommended in the 1950s as a mosaic alternative to biculturalism and bilingualism, with which it remains in tension. By 1988, the Multiculturalism Act was passed, promoting “the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society.” The image of a mosaic represents this diversity, although Professor Rodenburg noted that this image is a static utopian paradigm, beyond lived reality, even as the word “utopia” literally means “no place.” Indeed, a mosaic assumes that all citizens are equal, glued together by a common vision, which tends too frequently to be non-Native and monolingual (English) in perspective.

An alternative metaphor for multiculturalism is a tossed salad, which seems to promote diversity, but may in fact enable selective diversity that is more palatable to dominant tastes than the complete dish might be. Professor Rodenburg demonstrated with various salad ingredients, which were added in layers and ready to be tossed. Cherry tomatoes at the bottom could be seen to represent Canada’s native peoples, hidden by lettuce – the green land – and covered by various other colourful elements, representing various settler societies. As she pointed out, the more the salad is tossed, the more elements from the bottom emerge that haven’t been noticed before. At the same time, any elements that are not appreciated can be picked out and ignored, if one desires.

In contrast to both the mosaic and the mixed salad metaphors, Professor Rodenburg recommended a relational-processual vision of multiculturalism, in which individuals live and interact in relation to one another and the world around them. This vision is at the basis of AlterNative Citizenship, capitalizing the “N” to highlight the Native Canadian emphasis upon “all my relations.” Demonstrating AlterNative Citizenship, Professor

Rodenburg read several stories from progressive native writers, Thomas King and Drew Hayden Taylor, both of whom stress the continual relational constructions of identity. Like many other contemporary Native authors, King and Taylor retell stories that have been silenced in the past, while deconstructing static notions of authenticity. These stories provide a dialogic site for responsible listening, enabling the relational processual paradigm to extend to all Canadians.

Professor Rodenburg concluded that we need to listen, to find a way to exist together in an ongoing dialogue. Not only do we need to jump in the lake of multiculturalism, but we keep it from freezing in static patterns by interacting with our relations. Professor Rodenburg perceptively demonstrated such interaction not only in her lecture but also in her answers to various audience questions. As she indicated, we need to be willing to negotiate with those around us, recreating a living place where everyone has a voice.