

Sparling, Don

"Other language: otherness in Canadian culture" : Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro, 18-20 October 2003

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“Other Language: Otherness in Canadian Culture”
Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro, 18-20 October 2003

The 1st International Canadian Studies Conference, organized by the Yugoslav Association for Canadian Studies (YACS) to coincide with the 2003 Belgrade International Book Fair, which featured Canada as the guest of honour, was attended by more than sixty academics and students from across Europe and Canada. The event was preceded by a meeting of the Central European Steering Committee for Canadian Studies, its last before the inaugural General Meeting of the new Central European Association for Canadian Studies at Krakow in May 2004. The closing plenary session was followed by the annual General Assembly of the YACS, which elected its executive for the coming year as well as the editorial board to prepare the *Proceedings* of the conference.

Three distinguished guest lecturers set the tone for the conference, each in his or her own way exploring the theme of the event, “Otherness in Canadian Culture”. Maurice Lemire spoke at the opening plenary and focused on contemporary trends in Canadian literature as a reflection of the burgeoning pluricultural reality of Canada, both in its Anglophone parts and in Québec. On Sunday, the distinguished writer, critic and editor Naim Kattan analyzed the phenomenon of “L’écivain migrant”, drawing on his own experience to illuminate the rich interplay of past and present, of layers of cultural experience, in the creation of the literary work. Finally, the Serbian-Canadian writer and academic Ljubica Miličević spoke on “L’altérité du Canada”, again as seen through the lens of her own experience.

At sessions held throughout Sunday and on Monday morning participants delivered more than forty papers on a wide range of topics. The majority, as is so often the case at Canadian Studies events, centred on literary works. The writers dealt with covered a very wide range, from early nineteenth century “pioneers” such as Susanna Moodie, Thomas Chandler Haliburton and John Richardson through such modern “classics” of Canadian literature as Robert Kroetsch, Michael Ondaatje, Michel Tremblay, Réjean Ducharme, Alistair McLeod and Alice Munro, to the latest Booker Prize Winner, Yann Martel. The phenomena of multiculturalism and interculturalism as reflected in literature were examined in works by many writers – among them David Albahari, Vladimir Tasić, Negovan Rajić, Ying Chen and Béla Szabados – while in two other papers the literary image of Hungarians and Japanese Canadians served as the basis for more general discussions on “the other” in Canadian life and culture. A special session devoted to Margaret Atwood looked at examples of “otherness” in her works, whether in gender or genre, as well as at the phenomenology of otherness in her writing as a whole.

A smaller number of presentations, some of which in fact based their arguments on literary works, were devoted to topics that might loosely be labeled “social, political and cultural studies”. These included a discussion of the phenomenon of “the outsider” in Newfoundland culture (and its reflection in drama); an analysis of the differing Anglo- and Franco-Canadian views of nation and nationality; the place of the Doukhobors in

Canada; the presentation in the media of Natives by non-Natives; diasporic artists who use their transcultural positioning in Canada to challenge various Canadian nationalist ideologies; and the historic tensions between the literary marketplaces of Canada and the United States.

The programme of the conference also included a splendid opening reception hosted by the Canadian Ambassador to Serbia and Montenegro, Donald McLennan, at his official residence, which included a moving concert of religious music by the Kir Stefan Srbin men's choir. The final dinner on Sunday offered the participants an excellent opportunity to hold relaxed discussions and plan future cooperation. The participants in the conference agreed that it was a great success. In addition to its quality as a scholarly event, it also provided the opportunity for many Canadianists to re-establish personal contacts with colleagues whom they had not met with for several years, and helped serve as a welcome means of reintegrating the Serbian and Montenegro scholars into the wider international community of Canadianists.

Don Sparling

Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic