

Countries Like Drawbridges

Chilean-Canadian Writing Today

The Canadian edition of a collection of Naín Nómez' poetry is called *Burning Bridges*, whereas the book's original Spanish title means *Countries Like Drawbridges*. The literal translation doesn't sound as good, but that difference raises blisters: have we pulled those bridges up or have we burned them? Does anything but commerce travel between Canada and Chile these days? Who cares? And what does this mean for writers on both sides of the chasm?

In these days of neo-liberal economics and markets masquerading as the solution to all ills, with Canada suffering the consequences of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and Chile panting to be next in, Canadians generally and Canadian writers specifically may have more in common with their Chilean counterparts than ever before. But they hear about each other less than ever, a sad and costly loss.

An essential question for writers today is what it means for us to exist as people who live by our wits, applying the best our minds can produce to reflecting, refracting, raising consciousness and ultimately, yes, improving, the world around us, in a new world order where the market has become the supreme arbiter not only of trade but also of an expanding circle of human relations.

Throughout this century, there have been those who argue that a writer's work should be evaluated primarily in terms of numbers, preferably with dollar signs attached. But many Canadians, struggling to build a common identity, have argued in favour of cultural policies that compensate for the market's many blindspots.

These two poles around which the cultural debate has orbited have profound implications for the question of writers' role and the role of culture itself, in a modern, hopefully democratic, society. Are we critics, pathfinders, eternal malcontents, company for those who find themselves alone? Or are we clowns and entertainers, crowd-drawers, producers of a commodity to be sold like wheat or wood? Can the two roles somehow be combined?

These apparently theoretical questions boil down to issues close to the skin of writers anywhere — our own physical survival, not to mention the development of our skills and mental muscles, our work's ability to reach its destination, readers, the fractured mosaic of a community that they have become.

We can no longer croon our poems to them as lullabies, or recite our histories to the tribal crowd in a central square. The open hearth that the home once was and that common meeting place, the public square, were long ago co-opted, primarily by a media that purports to be universal, or at least to decide what universal is, using the criteria of one enormous and powerful member of the international community that we from smaller countries are encouraged to emulate, but can never become.

These phenomena, and the debates that accompany them, have spread their concentric circles throughout the world and refracted through the Americas in specific, similar and contrasting ways. We need each other's perspectives, confrontations, solutions. Questions.

The dictatorship that spurred what was probably the greatest exchange of Chilean and Canadian experience in the history of both countries disappeared in March, 1990, although anti-democratic relics remain, like the mines planted in metronomes in Ondaatje's *The English Patient*.

Since then, Canadian investment in Chile has mushroomed with companies like Placer Dome, Cominco, Lac owning a significant percentage of the Chilean mining industry. Chilean exports to Canada have also grown enormously. But the burgeoning community of expatriate Canadians in Chile, a small but growing mirror of the 40,000 Chileans estimated to live in Canada, has not brought with it an increase in cultural exchanges and literary connections.

We remain as ignorant of each other's moral and imaginative place on this planet as we ever were.

In literary terms, Canadian interest in Latin America generally and Chile specifically has followed a haphazard route, first traced by Earle Birney's entertaining search for Chile's Nobel and poet, Pablo Neruda, in the fifties. After the 1973 military coup, others followed physically or projected themselves by imagination, producing work like Pat Lane's Latin American poems, Tom Wayman's Chilean poems, Pat Lowther's Letters to Neruda and her long poem about the Chacabuco Concentration Camp, or, later still, Gary Geddes' *No Easy Exit*, or poems included in collections by Lorna Crozier and Mary Di Michele. Geddes, Crozier, Di Michele and Lane visited Chile at the height of military power.

As the Chilean coup provoked Canadian writers' to journey through dictatorship and its multiple shades of meaning and dissonance, it also blasted many Chilean writers into the dubious limbo of exile in Canada. The most concrete result was the bilingual (Spanish-English) anthology, *Chilean Writers in Canada* (1982), edited by Naín Nómez, and a special edition of *Canadian Fiction Magazine* dedicated to Latin American writers in Canada (1987). Eight of the thirteen writers were Chilean.

In more recent years, books by Leandro Urbina and others continue to explore the meaning of this experience. Increasingly, these writers turn their critical eyes away from the now non-existent society that they left behind, and toward Canadian society and its most treasured delusions.

The coup, idealism and a passion for Spanish took me to Chile in 1981. Eventually, I prepared an anthology of Canadian poetry, *Un Pájaro es un Poema*, and one of short stories, *La Reina Negra y Otras Historias*. They were the first of their kind in Latin America and possibly the world.

The result of these events has been a scattered knowledge of Canadian writers among some Chilean readers and the development of some strong individual Chilean-Canadian writers who have begun to stand out among their generation.

Thematically, Chile has become another milestone on Canadians' road to identification with the world's victims, a concern that is often expressed as a preoccupation for human rights and that has helped to strengthen Canadian democracy. For the Chileans, their Canadian experience has provided a distance and a space for pruning memory into something that goes beyond mere testimony, baring the white bone of human vulnerability and the dogs still snapping and anxious to crunch it between their teeth.

Naín Nómez, a fine poet, returned to Chile from Canada with a PhD and a (Chilean-Canadian) hyphen added to his identity, in 1985. For the next five years he survived by working at a cultural non-governmental organization, until an elected government ended political blacklists and he returned to work, as an Associate Professor of Chilean Literature, at the University of Santiago. Nómez has only returned to Canada three times over the past nine years, but his Canadian years deeply influenced him.

Two key experiences for Nómez were the “desacralizing” of the writer, reducing Chileans’ view of the writer as a godlike, prophetic (and inevitably masculine) figure into a “demystified, normal being.” He sees Canadian writers’ ability to work well in different genres as a reflection of this. The Canadian obsession with craft has also served him in good stead in a society where “writers often publish any old thing and think they’re ingenious for nothing.”

But Nómez says “we have wasted the possibilities for creating stronger links between the Chilean and Canadian cultures. We’ve had a few momentary and sporadic bridges, but they haven’t been developed into a more solid literary or cultural exchange, in spite of the many possibilities.” He contrasts this with the growing volume of exchange in the hard sciences.

“I think the mutual feedback between the Chilean and Canadian experiences must become more intense,” he adds, “perhaps through writers’ exchanges, conferences, essays, mutual congresses, and so on.”

The “multiplication of voices” in the work of writers like Ondaatje, MacEwen and Atwood, along with some of Canadian cultural institutions could contribute to Chileans’ attempts at rebuilding their culture after the destruction of the dictatorial period, while Chileans’ experience with literary workshops, the “public enthusiasm for poetry,” and some cultural laws and prizes that Chile has developed could be very useful to Canadians.

“All dialogue between different literatures is always productive,” he adds. “You might think we don’t have much in common. But both countries were colonies for a long time and the linguistic dependence, in one case on England and France and, in the other, Spain, have weighed enormously on our own cultural originality. These are also countries that have had to confront the problem, still unresolved, of their own historical identity.”

Among the common, schizophrenic roots shared by both societies is the problem of how the descendants of both the “conquerors” and the continent’s original peoples can overcome a brutal colonial past. This conflict, says Sonia Montecinos, a Chilean anthropologist, has produced a continen-

tal identity, “which today seems to be a fracture, but is nothing more than the confirmation of a cultural synthesis, ambushed by its own negation.”

Unlike Nain Nómez, Leandro Urbina’s wandering has taken him to Chile only for visits, and even a lengthy stay in Washington, DC, couldn’t tempt him away from Canada forever. Like Nómez, Urbina writes in Spanish, although his first book of short stories was published in English, by Cormorant Press (Ontario). Urbina’s first published novel, *Cobro Revertido* (Calling Collect) was among the ten finalists in the 1992 literary competition sponsored by Planeta Publishing, one of the biggest in the Spanish-speaking world. He says the Chilean on the jury voted against it, but the novel has been successful in Chile, selling about 6000 copies over the past year. It also won a newly established national prize, sponsored by the National Book Fund.

Cobro Revertido “is the story of thousands of Chileans,” says Bartolo Ortiz, the Planeta Manager responsible for its Chilean edition. “People want to know what happened to [the exiles] abroad. That’s the hook.”

Written in a relentless stream of consciousness, switching from first to third person, *Cobro Revertido* tells the story of a Chilean exile living in Montreal who has never quite recovered from the shock of being blasted out of his home country and away from the family ties that bind him too tightly, particularly to his mother. He learns of her death through a phonecall and goes on a binge, sharing (apparently) half-baked social theories about here and there, as he tries to gather the willpower and the funds to return to Chile for her funeral. The novel is an asphyxiating portrait, seasoned with sarcasm, of a desperate, dislocated man.

Although it doesn’t achieve the exquisite clarity of his best short stories, the novel is among the best of a modest boom in Chilean narrative currently gracing the shelves of Santiago’s bookstores. It invites comparison with *Morir en Berlín*, a novel about Chilean exile in East Germany, by Carlos Cerda.

While Urbina writes in an effective but sometimes overwhelming first person, Cerda experiments with the omnipresent “we,” giving us multiple characters (including several East Germans), and a broader view of the Chilean community in exile, watching over, judging and, all too often, sentencing its less fortunate members.

And, since hatred is more obsessive than affection, aversions ruled, and the already familiar closeness of friends became the terrain in which antipathies toward the rejected were justified, fed each other, grew. In the end, what became unknown in the [Chilean ghetto in East Berlin] was neutrality and tolerance. We had created another exile within our exile.

Urbina illustrates similar misunderstandings and incommunication between “close friends” in a scene in a Greek restaurant where his main character, “the sociologist”, begins to sigh uncontrollably. Convinced that he’s choking on a piece of tyropita, his friend Tito

begins to slap him on the back more and more violently and he says no with his hand, but the other continues to hit him and, upon observing no improvement, with Nico [the proprietor] opts for the emergency treatment for those who are choking and throws him to the floor, like in the diagram for first aid, and they jump on him and he shouts no, no and the others say it looks like it’s out, this method always works, and Nico had already saved a client this way once, even though he broke a rib and the ungrateful guy wanted to sue him...

Urbina’s character relates to Canadian society through his English-Canadian ex-wife, a doctor named Meg, and a Quebecois lover, Marcia. Forced to work as a janitor to finance his almost mythical masters, the sociologist observes:

He was trying to study during the coffee breaks and the central Americans and the Portuguese kept screwing him up with their infantile joking. Basically, they were offended that he unintentionally wanted to place himself over them. So in the end he decided that his candidacy for *la maitrise* could go to *la mierdise* for awhile, since he wasn’t prepared to live between two worlds with the worst of both. What’s more, considering some reasons of a scientific nature, perhaps this was a good opportunity to do some sociological research in the field. Perhaps he could write something about their cleaners and their rites of integration in Quebecois society at the end of the seventies. Cleaning offices was the first threshold to cross in order to join in the dream americaine...

Bitting criticism straight from the immigrant’s mouth, Urbina’s novel remains primarily a claustrophobic view of the mind of an intelligent man, torn from his own world and thrown haphazardly into a new one that’s not the least bit concerned about someone worthwhile landing on the junk heap. A pitiless criticism of the man’s own weaknesses, it deals a few glancing blows to the society that receives him.

After over a decade in Canada, Urbina lived in the States for several years where he “helped to raise my children, walked endless streets, drank litres of coffee reading the *New York Times*, spoke with a lot of people, bled at times,

laughed ‘til I shit at the economic model, so admired by some drooling Latin Americans and Canadians, finished my doctorate, separated from my wife and am now back in Canada (Oh Canada, our home and native land)...,” he says.

He refuses to get sidetracked into what he considers a pseudo-identity crisis.

“I don’t think writers have much identity,” he says. “Not like politicians who live on it. What is really important is to have a publisher.”

He expects both English and French editions of *Cobro Revertido* to be published soon in Canada. His decision to remain here has been dictated primarily by his need to both survive and write.

“I’m obsessed by the need to survive by doing what I love most, that is: writing and reading; and to live closest to those whom I most love and who are spread all over the place,” he says. Urbina likes the “great macho” Canadian poets, Purdy, Lane and Geddes, but thinks Canada’s strongest prose is still to be found mostly in Mavis Gallant, Alice Munro and “some short stories by Atwood.”

He finds a lot of Canadian writing “flat, bubbleless, commercial” and remarks that recent plays are full of American characters and incidents, “as if here there were nothing interesting and vital.”

“Years ago, I discovered that the window panes in my house filled with condensation and that it was possible to trace there the first letters that I was learning at school. Through them I could see the back yard, the animals my mother raised, the grey sky, the snow. That is, through those letters I could see life. From then on, and perhaps without realizing it until many years later, I was compelled to re-create my world or build others, starting with the word,” says Ramón Díaz Eterovic, a Chilean novelist and poet, and former president of Chile’s National Writers’ Society, the *Sech*.

“Those who assume writing as an exploration of man’s destiny,” he continues, “are taking on an enterprise that is neither a pass time, nor a game, but rather an often agonizing effort.” Writing in Chilean society, he says, is marked by the double solitude of the creator, confronting the blank page and “that other solitude, that could be called abandonment, related to the conditions a writer must overcome in order to develop and live through his work.”

The writer in Chile today is an ambiguous figure, navigating through the mists of multiple transitions — from dictatorship to democracy, from antiquity to an undefined version of modern, from exclusively male (as Díaz Eterovic’ own words reveal) to male and female, from Hispano-centric

to something more open to other ethnicities, among them the country's own, oft-forgotten native groups.

Do Canadians really have nothing to say to and nothing to learn from writers and thinkers of this calibre? Do we have nothing to gain or offer, in the way of our own experience trying to build a common culture and a country?

In the past, Chilean governments compensated for non-existent programs for artists by giving the upper class among them diplomatic postings that provided generous incomes, time to create and considerable prestige. This continued under the elected government that replaced the military in March 1990. In fact, the Chilean Ambassador to Canada was Francisco Simón Rivas, a fine novelist.

In the past four years, the government has created two significant programs for financing cultural projects, among them individual creation, book purchases for libraries and, to a lesser extent, publishing ventures. The main program, Fondec, is administered by the Ministry of Education. It suffers from a fixed jury that includes the minister himself and a limited budget for which individual creators, established universities, and major cultural institutions alike compete. The National Book Fund, created rather hastily last year, using income raised from a whopping 18% value added tax applied to books, provides a major prize for writers, won by Leandro Urbina in its first version.

In spite of the advances these programs represent, there are few opportunities for Chilean writers to survive and develop through their writing alone. There is no such thing as a Creative Writing program, nor do universities have Writers-in-Residence, except in the traditional position of university professor. While English is required throughout the educational system and while university programs often include courses and even degrees in English and English literature, Canadian literature is not studied and there is no literary equivalent to the kind of exchanges going on in the sciences.

Canadian literary periodicals seldom cover news of what's happening in literatures from other languages and other parts of the world. If asked, that's "outside their mandate." Chile has few literary publications, period.

Canadian writers' organizations seem to exercise only sporadic contacts with their equivalents elsewhere and focus primarily on other English-speaking and European countries. In spite of extremely limited resources, the Sech has attempted to convoke writers from at least the rest of Latin America. In 1991, the Canadian poet, Gary Geddes participated in an international gathering in Santiago.

And while Canada finances several fulltime staff positions at even its smaller Embassies to develop trade relations, it seldom invests a similar amount in culture, unless the country is selected as a special showplace (Mexico City, Paris, and London are in this category).

In Canada, Urbina, Carmen Rodríguez, Jorge Etcheberry, Daniel Inostroza, among others, work and write as Chileans within a Canadian environment. In Chile, Casa Canada, a Canadian centre for development and culture, eventually lost its lengthy battle for financing and survival. Naín Nómez, racing from one responsibility to another, wonders and worries over what more could be happening between the two countries. I survive and occasionally get the chance to tear time away from that concern to write articles like this one.

Perhaps there are two answers to my initial question. At both ends of this landmass that Canadians learn is two continents while the Chileans consider it one, individual writers have learned to live between “countries like drawbridges,” whipping across whenever we get the chance. At the same time, some of our institutions, that is, the ones we all finance through our taxes, are, if not burning bridges, at the very least, not building them, where they should.

