

Feminist Glaze on the Vertical Mosaic

by Myrna Kostash

"What was your book about?"

"Ukrainian-Canadians. The first Canadian-born generation."

"What about them?"

"For one thing, I tried to write about the community as a feminist."

"Isn't that a contradiction in terms?"

Ethnicity. Feminism. Popularly believed to cancel each other out. We think of the ethnic communities—Italian, Japanese, Pakistani, say—and decry the status of women within them. Ethnicity: patriarchal families, phallogocentric religions, the *chador* and the bound foot, arranged marriages, continual pregnancy, wife-beating. For a woman to celebrate, insist on, her ethnicity is for her to embrace her oppression.

Yes and no. Yes, for the above reasons; for the reason that ethnicity, for as long as it is an immigrant and beleaguered culture, can be a conservative, defensive, repressive and even reactionary force. This can go on for generations, for as long as the group assigns primacy to nationality.

I was a girl in the Ukrainian-Canadian community in Edmonton. In the Greek-Orthodox part of it, that is, (Catholics were held to be more Roman than Ukrainian and the Communists were — hiss! boo!—internationalists) which asserted itself as the only credible and authentic representatives of Ukrainianness. The prepubertal me accepted this as normal (wasn't everybody a Ukrainian?) but the adolescent rebelled: the language embarrassed me, the church infuriated me, the culture bored me. At age fifteen I severed all identification with the Ukrainian Canadians as a group and took up Anglo-American culture with a vengeance.



Myrna Kostash

There were many reasons for this but the one that interests me here is the incipiently feminist motivation of breaking with ethnicity at adolescence. For the child there were no negative consequences attached to being ethnic. For the young woman there were, and I could see them coming.

Ukrainianness. Preserving the culture. The culture: transmitted by institutions. The institutions: the church, the language school, the family. The Ukrainian family: authoritarian father, the dutiful (God bless her!) mother, the respectful children. This was, of course, an ideal. Nevertheless I intuitively figured out that at the heart of this ideal, of the concerned attempt to preserve identity and resist assimilation, of the revivalism that is ethnic pride, lay the oppression of women. To be a "good" Ukrainian I would have to renounce my ambitions for action Out There in anglo-land. To serve "my people" in their struggle for cultural specificity I would have to maintain the so-called tradition of the Ukrainian woman: she goes straight from her father's house to her husband's; she devotes her time to the rearing of Ukrainian children (for this the mother must be constantly in their attendance, or they will

be socialized by the anglo world) and the keeping of a Ukrainian home (needlework, bread-making, ritual observation); she provides her Ukrainian husband with an oasis of serenity, deference and loyalty, and she goes to church, there to be reconfirmed in her chaste, selfless and complacent Ukrainian identity.

I turned and ran. In retrospect, I dropped out of the Ukrainian community as an act of self-preservation. The fact that I have since gone on to become a feminist, a writer, a socialist, a Canadian nationalist, only confirms what I instinctively understood then: I had to choose between ethnicity and personhood.

Yes and no. No, because it's not that formulaic. There is a heartbreaking contradiction that confronts every ethnic woman. To save ourselves from anti-woman ethnic culture we take on the assimilationist culture of the ruling class male. The WASP. The racist, the chauvinist, the colonialist. It's called becoming a Canadian.

On my way to personhood I repudiated my class and ethnic origin (they are inseparable in the first couple of generations), I ridiculed my community, women included, I refused any historical memory. It's called self-hate.

Impasse. To defend herself from Coca-Colonization the Ukrainian woman must subvert her feminism. To defend herself from Cossackery, she must subvert her nationalism.

Yet today I call myself an ethnic feminist. In Edmonton there are many women who are simultaneously ethnic and feminist militants. Each has her own biographical route to that dual consciousness but certain experiences are common to us all. Political radicalization in the Sixties: through support for the national liberation of the Algerians, the Cubans, the Vietnamese, we

learned to take seriously the national aspirations of the Ukrainians too. (It was another instance of my self-hate that I celebrated the Cuban struggle, say, but thought that Ukrainian resistance to Soviet imperialism was ludicrous.) Through the ecology and counterculture movements, through pro-Québec campaigns, through Red Power and Black Power, through union struggles, through regional consciousness, through the movement for the liberation of women we developed a coherent critique of patriarchal capitalism and its culture and ideology. (Including a suspicion that anglo disparagement of ethnic social relations had a racist tinge to it.) As feminists we discovered that a history of women's heroic accomplishments in Ukrainian and Ukrainian-Canadian society had been suppressed. There was an alternative model to the "good" Ukrainian woman.

Through the hullabaloo around multiculturalist policies we discovered that not every element of the ethnic community had been bowdlerized and coopted. From the history of radicalism in Canada we learned that our people had fought back as farmers, workers, teachers, artists, as well as nationalists. In other words, all kinds of experience and awareness came together to convince us that not only was it possible to act from a fused base of radical ethnicity and feminism, it was necessary.

The ethnic without feminism is up against the patriarchal Man. The feminist without ethnicity is up against the colonialist Man. Either way, it's up against The Man. But the radical (i.e. anti-capitalist) ethnic feminist is potent and doubly critical. If you don't believe me, think of the women of Quebec. Better still, think of Viet Nam.

Granted that ethnicity is not nationality. But let's not quibble. In this time of mounting ideological and economic assaults on the lives of women, the ethnic and the feminist are engaged within us to fight the good fight.

EVE ZAREMBA

Out of line

This is my fourth column for *Broadside*. The previous three — on Iran, on women in positions of power, on the Pope — were safe. My views on these matters are eminently correct, conventional even, at least in my political circle. However, unlikely as it may seem, I harbour a whole mess of heretical opinions on all manner of topics. This seems like a good time to produce a small sample. There is bound to be something among this lot to upset everyone. Here goes, out on a limb.

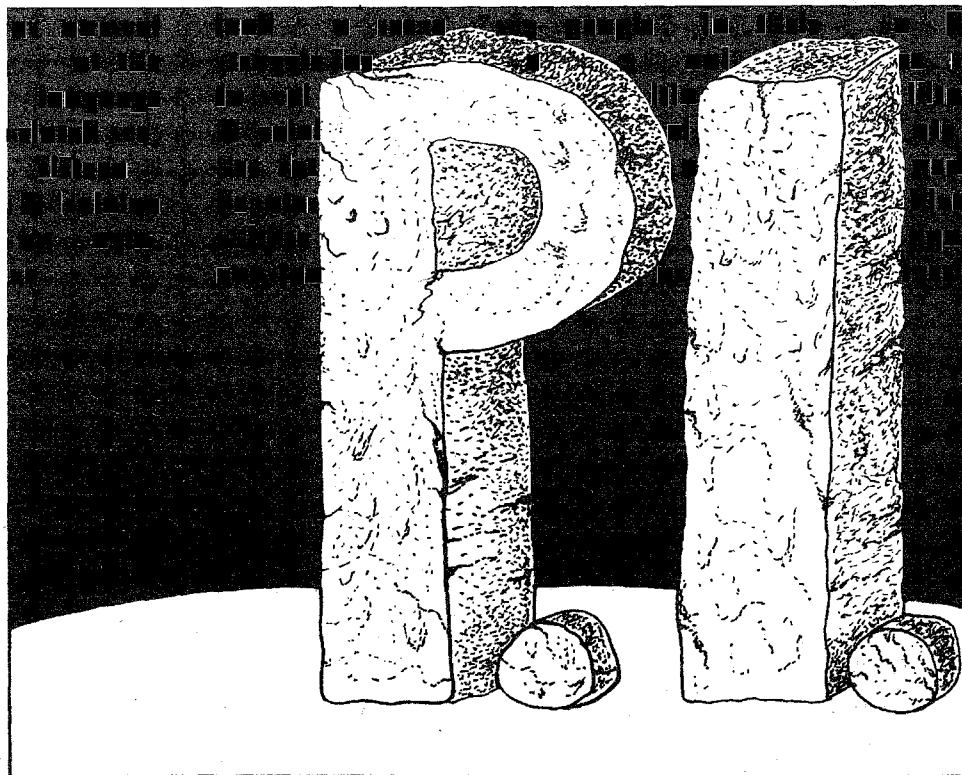
•I am highly suspicious of the Greenpeace Foundation. I would feel better disposed towards it if Greenpeace did not concentrate so much on cute, little baby seals and impressive, intelligent whales. What about the ugly and the dumb? Sentimentalizing animals (or human fetuses) is no service to life.

•The use of the term 'herstory' to signify the history of women is a sign of Anglo-chauvinism and ignorance, not of woman-identification. The word 'history' is of Greek origin, is common in many other Indo-European languages and is not related to the English male possessive pronoun 'his'.

•The last thing I want to see is One, Large, Unified, Single-minded Women's Liberation Movement. Pox on ONE BIG anything! Hydra-headed diversity confuses the opposition and makes us harder to destroy. However, a little more communication and cooperation among us sure wouldn't hurt.

•I am tired of glib non-solutions to real problems. For instance, bigger and better public transit systems throughout North America wouldn't make a perceptible dent in our fuel consumption. Or, bundling and collecting paper, cans and bottles may be good for the soul but does not touch the real solid waste problem. And, it's not a waste of 'scarce resources' to grow non-edible flowers rather than veggies in your garden or window box!

•Who can get indignant at the raise in the



Susan Sturman

price of gas and other fuels? We've had a free ride and now it's over. Concern with where all that money is going is another matter. Personally, it's worth every cent to watch the confrontation between the lucky monopoly owners of energy products (with the most inelastic demand of any product, including food) and those among our glorious leaders who are caught on the dirty end of the energy rip-off. The former are merely obeying the most ancient of man-made laws (Get yours while you can and damn the consequences); the latter emit the sharp, unmistakable scent of sour grapes. They deserve each other. (I know we are stuck in the middle, paying the shot. So what else is new?)

•I don't believe in 'burn-out' as applied to

women working in the movement. It's just a symptom of concentrating so much on the trees that the forest becomes invisible. Can usually be cured simply by reversing priorities.

•Sometimes, in the middle of the night, I get the sneaking feeling that more people will die of lung cancer, automobile accidents, alcohol and drugs, starvation, unsanitary conditions and various other 'natural' causes than in the conceivable future will expire of nuclear radiation. Millions more women will die or be damaged in childbirth or by battering or as a result of botched abortions; millions more children will suffer from malnutrition and physical abuse than will fall prey to nuclear pollution. But then I am a notorious optimist.



December is the time for predictions. I am no astrologer and I prefer poker to Tarot but I do want to be trendy. Accordingly, here are a few predictions for 1980, arrived at without benefit of crystal ball.

1980 will be the year when:

- Ayatollah Khomeini and Pope John Paul join a men's consciousness raising group. They will be known as Rollo and Chuck.
- It is finally noticed that the P.C. government of Ontario has been dead for years. It does not make any difference.
- Canadian media will *not once* call Laura Sabia 'a leading feminist spokesman'.
- Québec lets Canada separate without paying her share of the National Debt.
- Price of gasoline in Canada becomes as costly as it has been in Europe for decades.
- The insurance industry offers Teddy Kennedy a low-cost life insurance policy, with a double indemnity clause.
- Alice Munro produces a collection of short stories on 'growing up lesbian' in a small town in Southern Ontario.
- Alberta Heritage Fund subsidizes a new buggy-whip factory, in Ontario.

All of which means that 1980 will be a year like any other.