

Canadian Divides (Editorial)

By Oscar Hemer¹

Canada seems to be the exception to the worldwide rule of hostility towards culturally different migrants. Notwithstanding an annual intake of newcomers that by far exceeds that of other immigration countries, like the USA and Australia, and despite the fact that the great majority of the new Canadians are of non-Western origin, Canada has not (yet) suffered from any xenophobic backlash. On the contrary, USA's northern neighbour is proudly affirming its multicultural reality and maintains its official policy of multiculturalism, even under the current right-wing conservative government. In 2011 more than a fifth of the country's population was foreign-born, and in the urban centres, Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver, more than half the residents belong to "visible minorities", that is, the Canadian term for "persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour".² As social researchers Heribert Adam and Kogila Moodley note in their comparative study of South Africa, Germany and Canada,³ the Canadian example is a largely untold success story, which stands out in conspicuous contrast to the darkening powers of xenophobia in Europe

Yet, multiculturalism remains largely an urban phenomenon in the vast country where rural and remote are keywords, and it does not seem to encompass the Aboriginal peoples, which amount to 1,4 million or 4,3 percent of the entire population.⁴ Canada's shameful treatment of its Aboriginal population is another story that, albeit not untold, remains unresolved. From the year of Confederation, 1867, a policy of "aggressive assimilation" was implemented and it was to be carried out for more than a century through a system of church-run, government-funded residential schools. In all, about 150,000 First Nations, Inuit and Métis children were removed from their communities and forced to attend these "schools", where they were subject to systematic mental and sexual abuse. More than 4000 children are reported to have died in them. At its heyday in the 1930s, this system of cultural annihilation counted more than eighty institutions all over the country, and although it was dismantled during the 1970s, the last residential school was closed only in 1996.

Twelve years later, in 2008, the federal government established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, inspired by the South African example, with the charismatic Justice Murray Sinclair as chairperson. Like its South African predecessor, the Canadian TRC has toured the country, gathering testimonies at public hearings. Many witnesses have also made their statements to the Commission online. The TRC's report was supposed to be presented this year, but due to the large amount of disclosed records, the mandate has been extended to 2015.

On 24 May 2014, at the Aboriginal Club in the small town of Fergus, north of Guelph, Ontario, the Commission's work was presented to the local Cree community by Justice Murray Sinclair, accompanied by singer songwriter Susan Aglukark, herself a former victim of the residential school system -her song "Still Running", about the haunting memories of sexual abuse, is based in her own experience. The extent of the suppression and violence has come as a shock to the Canadian general public and shaken the country's self-image as a

global model in its foundations. Perhaps even more heart-rending than the actual recordings from the hearings were the interviews with the generation that has just come of age and learned about the abuse that their parents were subjected to.

My visit to Fergus was the conclusion of a two-day ComDev seminar at the University of Guelph, organized by Helen Hambly Odame as part of the Glocal Classroom project (of which more in a special issue of Glocal Times to be published in 2015). The seminar's theme was Communication for Environmental and Social Change, with the focus specifically on rural and remote areas – which in Canada comprise the large part of the land. Two out of five households have no access to the Internet in a country where most of the huge territory lies beyond “the last mile” of telecommunications. These areas also happen to be where most of the Aboriginal population lives.

The dual image of urban cosmopolitan affluence on the one hand, and rural isolation and poverty on the other, is truly striking. Yet, the urban-rural divide is a misleading dichotomy, and to override it is a prime concern for ComDev academics and practitioners in Canada, as demonstrated by many of the participatory communication projects presented at the seminar. Michael Gurstein, editor of [Journal of Community Informatics](#) talked of the importance of re-appropriation, to turn the perspective around to the user's perspective, as in the First Mile project which reverses the metaphor of “the last mile”. From the user's point of view it is of course the first mile. The latest issue of the Journal is dedicated to this project which, in contrast to an industry driven solely by technology itself and the prospects for profit, tries to articulate user-defined needs.

Another striking feature is the prominence of community radio, as in the [Ryakuga project](#), and participatory video, as in the work of film-makers Reena Kukreja and Shirley Thompson.

Community development by means of participatory video – and the emerging new genre “interactive web documentary” – will be one of the themes of the upcoming [Voice and Matter Festival](#) to be held in Roskilde and Malmö in September 2014. They are also in focus in this issue of Glocal Times, the 20th since the journal started (as a webmag) in 2005. Enjoy!

¹ Professor of Journalistic and Literary Creation and head of the Master's programme in Communication for Development at Malmö University since its inception in 2000.

² See <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/concepts/definitions/minority-minorite1-eng.htm>.

³ *Imagined Liberation : Xenophobia, citizenship and identity in South Africa, Germany and Canada*. Stellenbosch: Sun Press

⁴ According to the 2011 National Household Survey. Of the three Aboriginal groups, First Nations (851,560) had the largest population, followed by Métis (451,795), and Inuits (59,445).