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"They Need to Be Made to Understand in Their Imaginations": An Interview with Sherrill Grace

Sherrill Grace, professor of English at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, is acclaimed – both in Canada and from an international perspective – as a pioneer and true spearhead of Canadian literary and cultural studies. She has been associated with the English Department at the University of British Columbia since 1977, and she has been awarded several prestigious prizes throughout her career. In 2008, she was honored for her achievements with the Killam Prize, Canada's most distinguished annual award for outstanding career achievements in engineering, natural sciences, humanities, social sciences and health sciences.

Grace is the author of several monographs and numerous articles, and she has also a long list of editorships to her credit. She has published widely on Canadian literature and culture of the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, working, for instance, on the subject of Canadian drama and theater, biography and autobiography, art, film, and music. Grace continuously crosses the boundaries of various disciplines and has thus enlarged the scope of Canadian literary studies proper. In her monographs Grace has also devoted herself to particular authors – notably Margaret Atwood, Malcolm Lowry, and Sharon Pollock – as well as to Canadian visual artist Tom Thomson.

Two of Grace's monographs are particularly worth mentioning in the context of the following interview. First, her seminal volume *Canada and the Idea of North*, which appeared in 2002 with McGill-Queen's University Press. In this book (and elsewhere), Grace examines how images of the North have continuously shaped Canadian literature, art, and popular culture, and how the North has played a key role in the formation and perpetuation of a national Canadian identity. She also considers the issue of "gendering the North" here, as well as the changes in perception of the North that came with the foundation of Nunavut. Grace has carried her longstanding research interest in the North also into the 21st century, looking into fascinating examples of post-millennial artistic engagements – in, for instance, literature, film, and opera – with the Canadian North.

As for the pursuit of this elusive thing called "Canadian Identity," Grace has more recently contributed another monograph, which was published with the University of British Columbia Press in 2009: *On the Art of Being Canadian*. In this wonderfully

Zeitschrift für Kanada-Studien 31.1 (2011) 122-130

illustrated volume, the author traces how Canadian art and artists have participated in the construction and understanding of Canada's landscape, its history, and its national myths. Earle Birney, in his famous 1962 poem "Can. Lit." (with a typically Canadian self-ironic tinge to it) still mourned Canada's alleged "lack of ghosts," that is, its apparent want of strong mythologies to form a distinctly Canadian identity. In her book, however, Sherrill Grace shows how Canadian mythologies and identity/ies have prospered – against the odds – in an unprecedented flourishing of the arts throughout the 20th century.

The interview took place on the occasion of the interdisciplinary graduate conference "Crossroads: Canadian Cultural Intersections / Carrefours: Intersections culturelles au Canada" at the University of Konstanz, Germany, June 10-13, 2010. The conference was organized by Julia Breitbach, Florian Freitag, Anja Krueger, and Emily Petermann from the University of Konstanz, who are presently chairing the Young Scholars' Forum of the Association for Canadian Studies in the German-speaking Countries. Sherrill Grace delivered the keynote address entitled "Canada at a Crossroads: Ideas of North in the Twenty-First Century."

Julia Breitbach (JB): Sherrill, if you don't mind, I would like to start our conversation on Canadian literature and culture with the topic that you're also going to address in tonight's keynote lecture. You will be talking about the role that the Canadian North – or rather – images and cultural constructions of the North – have played, and continue to play, in the formation and constant negotiation of a Canadian cultural identity. I would first of all like to ask you in a very general manner: What do you think has made the Canadian North so unique and so important as a place for individual and collective projections (or images), in such a great variety and over centuries? And how does that compare to other northern countries?

Sherrill Grace (SG): I would say that the circumpolar northern countries, like Denmark with Greenland, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, and Russia, particularly, have very powerful mythologies of the North as well. What perhaps might distinguish the Canadian version of this mythology is a paradox, and that is that the vast majority of settler populations and First Nations populations in Canada have lived well to the south. There have been indigenous northern peoples, Dené people, Northern Cree, the Inuit of course, but the settler populations in particular are scattered along the very southern border of Canada. They do not know personally, individually, from their own experience the realities of a northern life, lifestyle, climate, etc., so it has had a kind of romantic attraction, based on a fundamental ignorance of the realities of the place. Now if you live in Iceland or in Sweden or in Norway or Russia you are living in the North, at a much closer proximity to the North, to the real physical climate and topography of the North than the great majority of Canadians. But deeply ingrained in the imagination then is this place that the vast majority of the population has never visited, will never visit and doesn't really know very much about, in terms of first-hand experience. The great majority of Canadians live in cities now – post-WWII the cities have been the places where people live, where immigrants arrive and stay. They do not travel to the Arctic in any great numbers. Some people do, of course, but it is a very small percentage. And this means that you have the capacity to imagine something that you do not know and to project onto it any number of fantasies. Some of the fantasies are positive, and some of them have always been negative, of course – ideas of freezing to death in the Arctic or being attacked immediately by savage animals or hostile people, or what have you. But it's usually freezing to death in the North, or becoming lost in the ice and the snow because you cannot figure out where you are. This has been a reality for explorers and fur traders in the past, who did venture into the higher North and Arctic, but not for the average person, who reads about it, who today would watch films about it a lot, but who doesn't go. So it's a paradox!

JB: You also discussed the "idea of North" in your 2008 acceptance speech for the Killam Prize, which was delivered to an audience from various academic fields. From this and other interdisciplinary encounters: Have you found it difficult at times to bridge the gap between disciplines? That is, to promote the "*idea* of North" – the North as a cultural geography and product of the human imagination – to geographers or historians, for instance, who might have a very different take on what the North "is", and on why and how the North is significant for Canada?

SG: That is an important, maybe crucial question, because you cannot solve problems dealing with the Arctic and the North, of which there are very many urgent ones, unless you work across disciplines. And yet, I would say that on the one hand it is very difficult to be heard, to be understood, to be taken seriously by scientists or by social scientists, who are very focused on the kind of work they do and not necessarily the least bit interested in what the humanities have to say. So I feel there's always a pressure, always an extra effort that has to be made to introduce the perspective of culture into this discussion of what you do at a policy level. And yet I'm absolutely convinced that it is essential, for the reason that I was just mentioning in my comment a moment ago: If the population who votes in our country does not know anything about the North, and a scientist comes along and says something very particular about gas hydrates, the people listening do not know what a gas hydrate is, have never been to the Arctic, have only this sort of airport trinket idea of what polar bears are. They need to be made to understand in their *imaginations*, and that is what the humanities do. So that if the general populace who votes – and can vote in effect on whether we do something about climate change, for example – if they have an understanding, a fuller, imaginative understanding of what the Arctic and the North means, then they'll be in a better position to understand what the scientist has to say. But it's hard to make the scientist see that [laughs]. And particularly the social scientists. And yet, I have a caveat that I'm quite pleased about: In February, the CBC did a special program on the North, and nobody who was interviewed had spoken to each other before, we didn't know each other, and yet we all came up with the same final conclusions about the importance, the need to enhance understanding in order to address an urgent situation. So there was a scientist, a social scientist, an artist, a humanist, and we were all reading from the same page. I found that encouraging. I thought, alright, we may not be talking to each other, but we all are seeing some of the very same things. Which is good if you're worried about the future in the Arctic.

JB: And this is actually my next question, which concerns the question of climate change and global warming. How much, do you think, is the "idea of North" – at least as it has been traditionally conceived – dependent on a state of "nordicity" – in the sense of ice and snow and bitter cold? In other words: What will happen to the "idea of North," when the physical-geographical North changes due to the impact of climate change? Will the "idea of North" – in literature, in the arts – adapt to these challenges (which I guess it will)? And if yes, would you say that we are then standing at a crossroads here – to also come back to the topic of our conference? Will the idea of North maybe take a new direction in the twenty-first century because of these dramatic changes?

SG: Well, I'm somewhat hopeful, because I think I can detect in very recent creative works – in plays, opera, novels, memoirs, and films – a shift in the construction of the North. It's still of course a construction, it's still an imagination, an imagined world, but it is one that is more flexible, more open, less locked into a kind of romantic – positive or negative – fantasy. This more recent imagination is one that's more open to the realities of the North, to the many cultural perspectives, the different voices, the different peoples – the Inuit, for instance, are major players now in representing the North or the Arctic to themselves and to the rest of the world, including southern Canada. So insofar as that change is indicative, I'm beginning to see that there could be a shift, and one key factor in this is a sense of warning that the North is no longer indomitable, that it's no longer up there someplace where nobody need care about it, but that it's right here where we are now in southern Canada or in southern parts of the world, and that it's fragile. So those two things are crucial: If you see the North as close to you instead of far, far away, where it doesn't matter, and if you see the Arctic as delicate and fragile instead of hostile and dangerous and powerful and indomitable, then you have cracked open some of those walls that separate people from what is really happening in the Arctic. You begin to open up the possibility that they would understand that they need to care. And I think the arts do that better than almost anything else.

JB: So we can say there's a shift in perspective that brings the issue closer to home?

SG: It does for some people. Artists, and writers, and filmmakers tend to be more aware, and then insofar as they are read or viewed or seen by a larger population then you begin to get a shift, but it's a very gradual thing, it doesn't happen suddenly.

JB: There are two more topics that I find challenging concerning the North, and both topics set up a comparative context. I would like to ask you to situate for us the

Canadian North in the context of Canada's infamous "two solitudes" (that is, Anglo-Canada and Franco-Canada/Quebec). And I would be very interested in hearing your opinion on whether it is in any way fruitful to compare, in terms of mythology, the Canadian North to the American West. Maybe first to the question of Anglo-French-relations: Would you say that Canada's North is more of a unifying or dividing concept? Are there more overlaps between Anglo-Canada's and Franco-Canada's images of the North, or does, say, the notion of North differ considerably for an Anglophone Vancouverite and for a French-speaking Quebecer in Montreal?

SG: I think this is something that has changed with history. The history of the development by settler populations of Canada begins in eastern Canada, because it is Europeans who were arriving in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries settling in the east and then only very gradually – like fingers moving out – beginning to venture into the, as it were, "hinterland," which would be further west and further north – not to settle, but to come back with furs and other trade items, and those trade items would then be going back to Europe. So this will be interesting also for the question about the myth of the West in the United States: The settlement of the two parts of North America, of Canada and the United States, was very different. There were different settlement patterns that go back several centuries. Concerning Canada's English and French populations, in the earlier phases of Canadian history there was more similarity, or there was more of a sense of unity, that could be achieved through ideas of nordicity than might be the case today. And yet at the same time I have argued that in times of national crisis when unity has been an issue – as it has frequently in the twentieth century and is still to this day – ideas of our northernness, of our nordicity, which in terms of climate the vast part of Canada shares (my little corner of Vancouver is a microclimate and is not like the rest of the country at all [laughs]), come into play. Most of Canada shares this long winter. Things like an ice storm that come along or dreadful, long and heavy winters, or terrible drops in temperature are common across almost all of Canada. So there is a kind of commonality that in terms of temperature and climate and seasons most Canadians share. And in times of crisis, the federal government has been very clever, very adept at enhancing what we share and trying to hide what divides us. I"e seen this happen now on about three major occasions in the twentieth century, and each time it has been a crisis where the federal government has offended Quebecers, and Quebecers have responded in their – what is now familiar to us – angry and resentful way, as they are a separate people. That said, there certainly has been quite an interesting movement, initiated in the humanities at least, by a colleague of mine at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), Daniel Chartier. Daniel has a laboratory, and a seminar and a library of materials that have to do with the North. He deals with circumpolar North and he deals with the rest of Canada, but his focus is on Quebec and Quebec ideas of the North, and he has done an enormous amount of research on that "Quebec-focus" on ideas of North. I would argue, and I think Daniel would agree with me, that many of those ideas overlap with the rest of Canada, but there are some very particular ones as well that are unique to the Quebec identity and to the Quebecers' own idea of a nation. And yet, one of our most famous geographers, Louis-Edmond Hamelin, is the one who coined the term "nordicité," and he applies the term "nordicité" to the entire spectrum of the North from east to west, and of course to the Beaufort Sea and the Arctic Ocean. He was not thinking exclusively of Quebec at all – he's a geographer, so he was looking at permafrost and tree lines and the indices of nordicity for the whole of the continent. So it's not as simple as either/or, but more complex, and more interesting for that, and it has changed over time.

JB: Concerning the second comparative set-up I mentioned: Canada and the United States. We do know, of course, the American West as the place of the frontier and as a "contact zone." Has the North at any time been also comparable to this frontier idea? And if yes, was it different even then? And would you apply the term "frontier" to the North?

SG: I wouldn't apply the term "frontier" to the North – not in the American sense of the West as the last frontier. There are various reasons, but a key one is the question of settlement that I mentioned a moment ago, which goes right back to the settler histories of the two different countries, to how they began and how they set up their initial patterns of settlement and relationship to the interior of the continent. The American Western frontier mythology was always about settlement, about claiming land, about ranching, about exploring. It was never a myth where you went for resources and then returned to the eastern states or provinces with your trade goods. It was always about expanding the empire through settling (and pushing the First Nations off the land of course). In Canada that westward movement certainly took place, but it did not take place as a northern movement. So when we speak of the Northwest, it's a very relative notion of North: It's mostly a westward movement, it's a slower process, and it's comparatively less aggressive, less genocidal – though it's not as if there wasn't aggression or genocide. And it didn't reach into the northern parts of the provinces, let alone into the Northwest Territories, or what is now Nunavut, or the Yukon, never mind into the high Arctic. The reasons for this are traceable back to the notion of what your staple resources are. The staple resources the further north you go are fur-bearing animals, and after that there would be minerals, and oil, and gas. You don't settle, you don't farm that kind of landscape. It's not amenable to farming, to settling, to large population bases, because you can't feed them. Instead it is the kind of environment in which you go in, you get what you want, and you come out, whether it's fur, or diamonds, or uranium, or whether it's oil and gas. You go in strategically with your equipment that you need, and you come out.

JB: I would now like to leave the North and turn to a more general topic, namely the past, present, and future of Canadian Studies, both in Canada and abroad. My first question in this context is: You're one of Canada's – and in fact the world's – foremost scholars in Canadian Studies. How did this happen? [laughs] I mean, how did you evolve into a Canadianist? Did you start out as one in your scholarly career, or did you rather *become* a Canadianist? Can you briefly trace your scholarly biography for us?

SG: I became one. And it's an interesting journey. When I was being trained in university as an undergraduate, there was almost no attention paid at all to Canadian literature. The country was not perceived to have a literature. Instead what you studied was British literature. And then I spent three years living in England, before I started my MA. I was at McGill University when I began my MA and again I didn't think about Canadian literature. There was virtually nothing around me being taught at McGill in Canadian literature. I did my MA thesis on George Eliot, and it seemed like the normal, natural thing to do that. That was the way I was trained, what I was told was a value – and I liked it of course, I enjoyed it. Then I went on to do my PhD, and again I wasn't thinking in any obvious way about Canadian culture or literature, I wasn't conscious of it: I did my PhD on Malcolm Lowry. But something shifted there, because in order to do that PhD research I traveled from Montreal, where I was living, to Vancouver, since Lowry's papers were in the archives at UBC. I had no idea I'd ever end up teaching at UBC. And that trip meant that I got to see more of my own country and begin to perceive it in a new way and through the eyes of an expatriate Brit who loved it and lived in this part of Canada and in some sense thought of himself as a Canadian. Things slowly evolved from there. When I started teaching, I started teaching some Quebec literature, and in those days (I sound like a dinosaur …), I did not think of it as Quebec literature in the sense that I would now, which is as a separate literature. Then I thought of it as French-Canadian literature, and I was looking at writers in the Quebec and Montreal scene. Montreal has always had a very vibrant art scene – it still does, it's enviable, it's wonderful that way – and this is when things began to percolate. You start thinking and shifting your perspective, and gradually I was losing track of England and thinking more about what was around me. And then I was simply asked to teach, and I started out by teaching Comparative American-Canadian. I taught it at McGill, and when I came to UBC I was hired to teach some Canadian and some AmCan, as I called it, and then things just evolved from there. And the Canadian scene just got so large – one person cannot encompass all of this – and I wanted to look cross-disciplinarily, I wanted to do research that crossed disciplines – so gradually then I started to move more and more into drama and music and film as well as literature as such, and other things had to go – you cannot do it all.

JB: I find it so interesting that your "awakening," so to speak, occurred when you went outside Canada and looked back on it, and even while you were still *in* Canada, you were in Quebec, which is a different environment too, if not a different "nation" ("a nation within a united Canada," as it has been officially declared by now) in relation to Anglo-Canada. Now that we heard quite a bit about your experience of and partaking in the emergence of Canadian Studies, I'm also curious whether you have some ideas – I'm sure that you have some ideas [laughs] – on the question in what direction is Canadian Studies, particularly in the field of literature, heading in the twenty-first century? Do you see certain trends or movements?

SG: Hmm, that is a difficult question and I find it somewhat a troubling question. Because I worry a little bit, quite frankly, that Canadian Studies within Canada is getting less attention than it should and than it has. I'm not sure that there isn't more interest outside of the country now, at this moment in time. Whether it's this notion – which I think is often misplaced – of globalization, or it could be what I'm sensing is coming from such a complex internal look at Canadian culture, by which I mean the multicultural aspect. It becomes so diverse, so complex, so many threads in it that thinking of it in any kind of umbrella term becomes quite daunting. Maybe that's part of it. I think you'd have a better time getting an answer to that question by asking somebody young like Larissa [Lai],[1] who is living it in a way that I'm not in my generation. But I do see a very continuing interest and an incredible expertise outside of the country, and I find that very heartening and very encouraging and exciting. Inside the country I'm more troubled about how much a young generation of Canadians know about their own country and their own history. I find they don't. It's not that they're not interested when you expose them to it (I'm talking about undergraduate students), but they are still overwhelmed by American culture. And the internet and other very new technologies that are available make this even more of a presence for them. In such a world to hear the Canadian voices is increasingly difficult. It's never been easy in North America where the other big English-speaking country dominates everything but it's even more difficult now than it was. And yet we have fabulous writers and fabulous playwrights, and we are beginning to get our own opera – which I know in Germany must sound so silly, since you *live* opera [laughs] – but well, we're beginning to get our own opera on Canadian subjects. So it's a complex question. I'm shocked I guess by the ignorance of Canadians about their own history. As you know I've been working on the two world wars – this is my current research – and there are very basic facts that my undergraduate students don't know, that were not taught in high school maybe, or that they didn't think it was interesting to know. Or they think it's more cool to know what happens in the United States than in their own country, I don't know.

JB: It's an open future then.

SG: An open future, yes, but always more exciting – the writing, the work that's been produced is amazing in its variety and quality.

JB: You already touched upon my last point in this interview, which concerns external perspectives on Canada such as, say, European, or maybe even specifically German research in Canadian Studies. Without wanting to merely fish for compliments [laughs], do you see any particular benefits of such an outsider's perspective on a foreign culture, and what are maybe also drawbacks or blind spots that you have noticed in research on Canada from outside of the country?

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[1] Larissa Lai, assistant professor of English at the University of British Columbia, also took part in the conference. In particular, she contributed a reading from her work as a writer of fiction and poetry.

SG: Well, I guess my first reaction would be that it's amazing, particularly in Germany and in the Scandinavian countries, to see the interest and depth of knowledge about Canada – I'm impressed. I've traveled a lot in Germany, I'm very fond of German culture – but I don't know the country in the depth that Reingard [Nischik], for instance, knows Canada. It's amazing what she has done for the study of Canada. Reingard is at the top of my radar, of course, but there have been other people, Albert-Reiner Glaap in Duesseldorf, Konrad Gross in Kiel, Martin Kuester in Marburg – they're extraordinary.

So would there be blind spots? Of course, inevitably, there have to be blind spots, or there have to be illusions that you might have, or romantic ideas. But no, I'm really impressed with the quality of the work. Much of it I've read and I think is excellent.

JB: I find this a very nice and encouraging comment to us "external" Canadianists – coming from one of Canada's leading voices in the field – to close our conversation. Sherrill, thank you very much for sharing your expertise with us. It's been an inspiration talking to you.

SG: Thank you. It's been a pleasure.