

BACK to the FUTURE of

QUEBEC



by M. NOURBESE PHILIP

THE YEAR IS 2020. A woman's body has been found frozen in the Canadian north. Biotechnology has so improved that her body has been thawed out and she has been restored to life. Gwyniad, as she is known, was buried in an avalanche in 1993. While she remembers some things, her political memory has been affected, in addition to which she is unaware of many developments in Canada, not least of which are Canada/Quebec relations. What follows are letters—in some cases excerpts from letters—written by Canadians to Gwyniad in response to her publicised requests to be brought up-to-date on what has happened regarding Canada and Quebec.

Dear Gwyniad:

In an attempt to help you to understand Canada/Quebec relations I went back to the journal I kept around the time of the 1995 referendum to see what my thoughts were:

October, 1995: "My Canada includes Africa. I've decided to put these words of greeting on my answering machine. It's an attempt on my part to counter the overwhelmingly Eurocentric context in which the debate over Quebec has taken place.

Do I have any legitimacy to say anything about Quebec? After all I am a newcomer to this land—this space called Canada. A space which, despite being a land of immigrants, has not traditionally welcomed all immigrants equally. Not all immigrants are equal.

My Canada includes Africa. And India. And China. And Japan and... The so-called ethnics. The very ones who, according to Parizeau, lost them the election. And money. He never said whose money. Ethnic money, perhaps? Non-ethnic money as in Anglo money?

My Canada includes Africa. An odd configuration of the greater being contained in the lesser/smaller. But for now it works metaphorically."

Gwyniad, I hope my letter fills in some of the gaps.

Dear Gwyniad:

I am so happy that you have been thawed out and brought back to life! It seems odd to talk about Quebec's independence since so much is now taken for granted. As you must now know, Quebec has been independent for some 15 years. It hardly seems memorable any longer. Everyone in the ROC (Rest of

Canada) now accepts it and no longer sees it as such a terrible thing after all. We still go to Quebec to get a taste of Europe—Paris, France. Montreal continues to be very cosmopolitan and multicultural although Toronto still has it beat. But it's got class, Montreal does—you've got to give it that. What is it like trying to catch up with 20 years of history? Difficult and stressful I imagine.

Dear Gwyniad:

I was saddened to learn of your setback but happy that the doctors were able to fit you with a bionic arm. I'm sure other people have told you that it really isn't so different from how it was before. And Quebec and Canada have recently sent a joint team to take part in the winter Olympics in Norway.



At the time of the 1995 referendum I was a student at the University of Toronto and had done a paper on the role of the media during the referendum. An excerpt from my paper follows:

"Brooding, silent and inaccessible...an empty land with wonders" is how one writer describes Canada. This is the myth on which Canada was

founded and exploited. For instance, if the land were, indeed, empty then issues related to First Nations people become less valid. This description is, in fact, very much the description of the settler and the silence identified in the above quotation has expressed itself in many pernicious ways, not least of which has been the way in which the media have dealt with First Nations issues.

The CBC failed to frame the issue of the 1995 referendum accurately, but to do otherwise would have meant talking about how this land had been settled, what had happened to the First Nations peoples in the process and how the Canada/Quebec issue is premised on the silence and the silencing of these peoples.

There was very little mention of First Nations issues in post-referendum analyses on the mainstream media. For example, the Morningside show the morning after the referendum only mentioned First Nations issues twice. After some two hours of discussion and panels, Barbara McDougall, former Conservative MP, alluded to the outcome of the referendums held by the Cree and the Inuit. The overwhelming vote to stay within Canada, she opined, had helped the Federalist side.

A First Nations man made his appearance on a panel of "minorities" assembled to discuss Parizeau's comments about the "ethnic vote." This was the second time a First Nations perspective was given and the only time a First Nations voice was heard on this show at least. His placement on the "ethnic" panel clearly reveals how the CBC contextualised the issues relating to Native peoples.

It was no different on television and there were times when I



Left: Modification of Enrique Chagoya's "When Paradise arrived," 1989 and detail from Gerald McMaster's exhibition at UBC Museum of Anthropology, 1992.



grew quite disheartened, so few people appeared concerned with the issue of aboriginal claims. Was I being unrealistic? I confess to feeling that way until I read an article by R. Pierre Baril in *The Globe and Mail*: "the relative silence about aboriginal issues during the recent referendum campaign is an ominous sign of Parti

Quebecois vulnerability on this issue. After 300 years, most Montrealers still whisper the anglicized word "Caughnawaga" (the Kahnawake Mohawk reserve just south of Montreal) with a nervous mixture of derision and fear."

I remembered how my mother would tell me that my grandfather, when he would get drunk, would say the most terrible things to my grandmother. He was Francophone and she Mohawk. He would tell her that she was a savage and they should have killed them all when they came to Canada. This went on for years, my mother said, until my grandmother fixed him so he never talked again. But why am I telling you all this? I don't know—maybe because I see me in you.

What I wanted to know back then was how you could separate a country like Canada when Quebec flowed in Canada's veins and vice versa, and First Nations blood in both. It would be like my trying to separate myself into the French part, the African Haitian part, and the Cree part. How could I do that and still remain whole? But then I would read about what was happening in Bosnia, in the former Yugoslavia where Serbs and Bosnians had intermarried for generations. It hadn't stop them entering a bloody, internecine conflict that went on for years. And I would grow cold thinking that this could happen in Canada.

Dear Gwyniad:

The seeing and sawing went on for several months, the accusations, the denials, the you-did-it-no-you-did-it, the recriminations with talk about the Night of Long Knives. Finally someone suggested they should decide the issue through hockey. Don't know why it took them so long; they clearly hadn't read my work, *The Zen of Hockey*. Having the teams compete meant that Canada and Quebec wouldn't actually have to fight. The winner of the series would get to decide the issue of the separation of Canada.

This being Canada there were the arguments about whether there should be women on the team. And of course the issue of "ethnic" players was front and centre. The Canadian team must be multicultural, some people argued; after all it was one of the fundamental principles of the country. Others said that they couldn't have affirmative action policies deciding the outcome of Canada. They wanted the best. It was all very Canadian. Very polite. Very hypocritical. And very racist. All at the same time.

Finally we had the Canadian dream team—representative of all Canada: a couple of women, one African, one Asian, and one Native person who was also a woman. Quebec's team was very much "pure laine" and "vielle-souche." The organizers felt that the ethnic players hadn't quite mastered the game. And the women? Well, their best female players were unfortunately all pregnant. So there we were, in the year 2005, Team Canada vs. Team PQ.

I can still see it as if it happened yesterday. The game of the

century. You've got to hand it to us for being opposed to violence and being peaceful. What other country decides its fate through a game. But then it's all a game isn't it—and that was what my book was all about. Of course the stock markets were in a flurry. With each goal the market would lurch this way then that way. The loony became a fucking yo yo. (Excuse the language but emotions ran high.)

Team Canada's top scorer was a woman of Jamaican heritage—a right royal amazon on blades. As luck would have it she was ill for the last game. Did the Quebecois win? I say no because the goal was off-side. But the referee ruled it was a fair goal.

If nothing else Canadians and the Quebecois take their hockey very seriously. There was rioting in the streets—in the snow actually. Guerrilla armies got started and these wars and skirmishes lasted for a good two years. Eventually, people got fed up with it all and finally the entire matter was taken to the Supreme Court of Canada which decided that the country had to abide by the hockey score. And that, my dear Gwyniad, was how Quebec finally got its independence.

Except it was all a dream. The result of all the stress caused by the constant constitutional discord in this country. It might as well be decided by a game I remember thinking at the time, so little of it appeared to make any sense any longer.

Yo Gwyniad:

Man that's some cool name. Gwyniad! Sounds like a queen or something. I read somewhere that it meant winter. Makes me shiver just thinking of it. Having a name like winter. Is that for real? Anyway you've been tripping out in the cold so long you've missed some real far-out happenings here in this country they calling Canada.

It was the unity rallies that grabbed me—especially the one in Montreal held the Friday before the Monday referendum. A couple of weeks before that—October 16th to be exact—the brothers—one whole million of them—had marched on Washington. The Nation of Islam's main man, brother Louis Farrakhan, had called it as a day of atonement for the Black man. I wasn't down with all that atonement shit, because I didn't think we had anything to atone for, but the brothers came, atonement or no atonement. Gwyniad, my sister, it was outta sight to see the brothers assembled there at the Washington monument. Now that was a nation. A great Black nation, or one part of it, that had suffered, shared a common history, a common language, and had had a common experience of oppression despite all the Oprahs and Michael Jacksons.

How down you are with your history?—I know you're Quebecois and First Nations but you're also Black—from the proud nation of Haiti, the place where those African slaves kicked white butt—French butt at that—and led by General Leclerc, Napoleon's brother-in-law himself. That showed me that no amount of paper and so-called law could make a thing out of a man. Or a woman for that matter. The first and only successful slave revolt! That's what Haiti means to me and I'm sure to you too.

I was into comparing what kind of demo these folks from the great white north could pull off. Gwyniad, my sister, excuse my informality, I was impressed. Shit man there was emotion! I didn't know these white folks could feel so much and even show it. These white folks could really get down when they felt like it. They were laughing and crying—with their faces all painted up with the fleur-

de-lis and the maple leaf. Last time I had seen all this emotion among white folk was when I went to the Gay Pride Day, but I didn't know these straight white folks could get it up like that. Man I was real proud of them. Now, don't get me wrong, sis Gwyn. We still had them beat—they were a million Black people at the Million Man March. Period. Any one want to challenge that can call me. They weren't half as many of them as of us, but it was rich, man, rich with singing and waving and showing how much they loved Canada. They had come by plane and train and car and bus and it wasn't warm either. And they were there to big up Canada. Snow and ice and all.

Even T.O. had its share of unity rallies, with all the cultural bigwigs and icons standing up for Canada. But you know what, Gwyniad my sister, I couldn't help wondering how come it was all so wwwhiiiite man! I mean especially in Toronto. Now, I myself didn't actually go to the rally. With all the shit that Harris the Hun and his henchmen were laying on the people back in those times, you could easily have spent all day every day going to rallies to protest something. I was all rallied out so to speak around that time and had to make my choices. So I didn't check out the T.O. rally. But I read the papers, looked at the television and all I could see was pure white face Gwyniad, pure white face. There was the odd brown or black face, but very odd.

Now don't get me wrong, sis Gwyn, pardon the familiarity, but I feel I know you. I take full responsibility for not going to the rallies. And maybe the brothers and sisters felt like I did, that they weren't really part of the debate. Whatever the reason, we—what the white folk calling minorities or ethnics—have to take responsibility for not showing up. But guess what, there weren't no black or brown faces on any of the platforms either. Not even a token. Sister, I ask you, couldn't the organizers find a few "ethnics" to show off how multicultural Toronto was? Back then they were always touting Toronto as the most multicultural city in the world—but I didn't see no multiculturalism during this debate. Only when Parizeau got his butt kicked and presto! there we were in our accustomed position—being blamed!

Sis Gwyn that's like light years away! Lord but we lived through some serious hard times. That Harris the Hun man made us suck some real salt. One way or another Black people always sucking salt, so we were kind of used to it, but that was definitely what I call the white times—same as what white folks liking to call the dark ages.

But hey, Gwyniad my sister, at the time I felt that whatever happened Quebec had given the ROC an outta sight gift—I mean thousands of people coming out and spreading their loving for Canada for the whole world to see. Yes, Gwyn sister, love. This showing of love was far-out man, far-out. Whether or not you supporting nationalism and think it's a good thing, whether you questioning why people wanting

Quebec to stay in Canada, it was a serious witnessing of something.

Speaking of why people wanted Quebec to stay in Canada—dig this: I actually heard this woman on the radio saying that she wanted to keep Quebec in Canada because it was nice to have a bit of Europe in Canada! Say what! Where had I been living all this time, I wondered. Africa? Asia? the Middle East? Last time I checked I could see made in Europe stamped all over everything. I wanted to ask this woman if she even cared whether Quebec wanted to stay in Canada. Shit man it was like having a picture in your living room—it's nice knowing that it's there.

But as I was saying—love, Sis Gwyn—it's a hard emotion—don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Many years ago I saw a sign at the Montreal airport saying that Rapid Air would take you straight to the heart of Toronto. "Dig that," my lady at the time said, "The heart of Toronto! Toronto doesn't have a heart!" We cut up about that one. It was supposed to be a real heartless place, Toronto. This was what a Quebecois sister once said to me—that Quebec was the heart of Canada. Many people were really down with this belief. Even the Deputy Prime Minister, Sheila Copps, shed some eye-water in the House of Commons saying that without Quebec Canada would be "only an empty shell... The heart of Canada is Quebec." Maybe, Sis Gwyn, that was what all those people were demonstrating about. When somebody's about to rip out your heart, you can't just chill out, smoke a joint and say, that's cool, man, that's cool. You get your butt moving and do something. Anything. It's bad enough to lose a limb, but once you lose your heart, you either have to grow another one, have a transplant, or you die. Since Montreal has left, sis Gwyn, Toronto has had to grow a heart—a big, wide multicultural and multiracial heart.

And Canada did not die—she just grew another heart. I'm outta here Gwyn and you look after yourself now that you're back in the real, or is it unreal world. Speaking about love and all that, Sis Gwyn, I don't mean to pry but what about you?—I mean you're fine looking sister and all that. You've been gone for what some 20 years? It must be lonely. Anytime you want to talk to me just pick up your pen or get on that e-mail. My address is: allblak @ af.rica

Dear Gwyniad:

It is not often one has a chance to be a part of living history and I want to add my voice to the others.

What I feared most was that the fed-



Top: Clarissa Sligh, detail from "Seeking comfort, I sucked my thumb," 1989.
Middle: Lorraine O'Grady detail from "Art is...", 1985.
Bottom: Postcard from the collection of Henry Louis Gates Jr.

eral government would make all these concessions to keep Quebec in Canada and at the end Quebec would still leave. And we would be left with a Canada that would be substantially weaker—a country only in name. Unless there was a miracle of some sort it was only a matter of time before the sovereigntists won.

There was a fundamental flaw at the heart of our country and that was what had happened to the First Nations people; unless we settled that we would be condemned forever, I felt, to agonize about whether or not we had a country and what that country was.

"But the French have been here for 300 years!" This from a progressive friend in response to my concern about First Nations issues. The implication being that by virtue of their being here for such a long time, this somehow justified? rationalized? explained? why they should become a nation.

I challenged her with two examples: the presence of Africans in the United States for some four hundred years which as of 1995—and to a large degree still today—had failed to ensure that as a people they enjoyed the rights of full citizenship, let alone have their own nation. If length of time and exploitation were prerequisites for nationhood then African Americans should have been at the top of the list.

The second example was that of Israel. The Zionist claim to the re-establishment of the Jewish nation in Palestine was based on the idea of an unbroken connection of the Jews with the land of Israel which goes back to biblical times. Despite the fact that the Jews had not lived in Palestine for centuries. My point? That clearly nationalistic claims to land are not necessarily extinguished by the passage of time. Neither does passage of time (as in the case of African Americans) necessarily give one greater rights to a homeland and nationhood. The fact that the Quebecois had been here for 300 years meant simply that—that they had been here for 300 years. It did not necessarily cancel out the claims of aboriginal people who, unlike the Jewish people, have always been on this land they call Turtle Island.

I'm not sure if my friend got my point, but I hope that you do and that my letter helps you to understand a bit more about what happened to Canada and Quebec.

Dear Gwyniad:

I had to go back to my journals and letters to see what I thought—it all happened such a long time ago and it seems like so much dead history.

Except for this letter to a friend—October 1995: "I have had moments of feeling 'enough already'!—to France with Quebec!... More than a little bending of the truth has occurred regarding the description of Quebec's position in Canada. Recently that is. Then I thought that maybe Quebec leaving would create that moment of instability which might have a destabilizing effect on politics in Ontario. And perhaps in that moment we could bring enough pressure to bear on Harris' regime and its scorched earth policies. I

have dismissed that because people aren't ready to take advantage of any such moment, and I suspect it will degenerate into chauvinism and ethnocentrism.

I do question this commitment to the nation-state that is supposedly Canada when our economic life is really controlled by the bond brokers like Moody's in New York. Further, with the rush on the part of the federal government to evacuate (eviscerate?) areas like health care, social services, unemployment insurance, I ask myself: what use government? Isn't it more than a little ironic that at this time when there is a move by the right to reduce government, to paint government as a monster (arguments made by militia movements)—and sometimes it is—we in fact have the government reducing its role? At the same time we—and the Quebecois—are expected to believe that there is some value to maintaining this fiction called the nation-state.

A couple of weeks ago I finally understood why I am opposed to Quebec separating. And the answer lay in language. For Quebec to separate and set up its own nation is to hark back to a time of settlement of this country by the Europeans. It is to enter the discourse of colonialism, isn't it, complete with warring European powers? Surely today, in 1995, the language we ought to be speaking, the discourse, if you will, we should engage in is that



of resolution of First Nations issues including the return to First Nations people of illegally obtained lands. Surely this is what should be galvanising us and not the dreams of the descendants of a small band of European settlers whose women don't have enough children. We are in a time warp aren't we? For Quebec to separate is to give validity to that discourse which is fundamentally flawed by its inherent immorality. So for all that it is worth—which is nothing—my answer is no, although I believe that it probably will not be worth the trouble trying to pacify and

keep Quebec happy within Canada. Already departments such as the cultural wing of the External Affairs are almost completely devoted to Quebec artists.

It seemed to me, Gwyniad, that this debate between Quebec and the ROC was essentially a colonial discourse—two European powers which had duked it out 2 centuries ago and from the point of view of at least one of the two, there was unfinished business to settle.

Despite the fact that Elijah Harper and other First Nations leaders had stated that there could be no settlement of constitutional issues in Canada without a resolution of aboriginal rights, they continued to be ignored for the most part. They were right to resist being included among the other ethnic minorities like myself who had come here in the wake of European settlement. They were right to resist the forced extinguishment of their rights. And while the preamble to the Canadian constitution continued to deny them recognition appropriate to their status they were right to keep challenging any constitutional accord with Quebec.

Canada has been built on the denial of aboriginal rights. It should not go into the future continuing to deny those rights. That was how I felt in 1995 when this debate was at its height. But as the African proverb says, when two elephants fight it is the grass that suffers and that I believe was the position of the First Nations

people vis-a-vis this archaic, anachronistic Anglo/French dispute.

The Inuit of Nunavik, above the 55th parallel, in Quebec saw the writing on the wall and moved very quickly to amalgamate with Nunavut—the eastern section of the North-West Territories. In 2000 they became a separate territory.

I did subsequently change my position to support the yes side but that will have to wait for another letter, Gwyniad. I trust that my letter has helped you.

Dear Gwyniad:

This is my second letter to you, but I felt that my first one omitted a few important issues. Time and time again the Feds told the Quebecois that it made poor financial sense to separate, but then very little made sense financially back then and in some ways it was a relief to see a people not letting their actions be determined by the bottom line as the rest of Canada was. I mean how can you weigh a pension against a homeland. I'm sure some people thought that way. You just can't put a dollar sign on love for a homeland can you?

The language the Feds used was very slippery and seductive. At the "unity" rally Chretien talked about how "we built this country." Who was the we, I wondered. The Chinese? The Japanese? The African? The First Nations person? Who, indeed, had built this country and at whose expense? What of the First Nations people whose lives and cultures were seriously compromised, threatened and in too many instances wiped out.

"We built this country": the language sounded disturbingly like that of other white settler leaders such as Ian Smith of the former Rhodesia. I don't mean to suggest that Chretien was an Ian Smith, the leader of the UDI movement in Rhodesia, but to a former colonial like myself, the language was all too familiar. The only difference between Canada and countries like Rhodesia and South Africa was that in Africa they didn't manage to wipe out Africans to the same extent they had done with Native peoples in Canada and the United States. That's all. "We built this country." As if they arrived and found a land unpopulated by anyone.

Someone else at the rally—was it Johnson, perhaps? I don't remember—talked about how people around the world wanted to come here to "this wonderful country, Canada." He failed to mention that not everyone was equally welcome in Canada in 1995, and that this had always been the case. The Jews could testify to that; so could Chinese, Asian and African peoples. Just before the 1995 referendum, this government that was extolling how people desired to come to Canada, had instituted a sort of designer-class immigrant. The only qualification—money. It had also instituted a head tax, not to mention the steep application fees which were already being charged. Fluency in English and French was also made a requirement. Increasingly the Canadian government was requiring DNA testing in cases involving Africans to prove that family relationships existed. And when they got here—those same immigrants were—and still are—made to feel that they were to blame for crime, high welfare rates and for taking jobs

from Canadians. But listening to those politicians talking about how Canada was envied the world over because it was such a generous land, you would not have known this to be case.

Speaking of politicians: they never do change, do they? One would have thought that they understood that scaring the populace never worked. Bob Rae had tried to scare the voters in Ontario into voting for him a second time around in 1995. They should have. Many realized that too late, but his tactic didn't work. So too in the lead-up to the referendum the federalists kept trying to scare the Quebecois: they would be worse off financially if they voted for sovereignty. Vote for us or else. The or else in this case was financial hardship for the Quebecois. But financial hardship was what we were all living with in the ROC—high interest rates, cut backs, cut backs and more cut backs. The only verb politicians knew back then was CUT. The only principle driving society—the bottom line.

And I do remember thinking at the time that if I were Quebecois I would have thumbed my nose at the federalists and shown them my butt. What could they—the federal government—offer us? They were busy pulling out of everything that had held this country together—the health care system, the unemployment

insurance system, welfare—the whole social safety net that had made us a kinder, gentler people. And what would we, the Quebecois have? A new land! Notre pays! Finally. That which we had been longing for since we lost to the English on the Plains of Abraham in 1759. And those turkeys in Ottawa just didn't get it. They wanted us to throw in our lot with them and their colossal absence of vision, their bottom-line economies that were shrinking by the day. So of course, vive le Quebec libre!

But Gwyniad, you who have been gone for so long don't know the half of it.

You would have thought that the plight of the Quebecois would have made them sensitive to issues regarding aboriginal rights. WRONG! The Cree and the Inuit had made it very clear that they were supporting the federalist side. (They had held their own referendums just before the Quebec referendum and they wholeheartedly voted to stay in Canada.) They wanted to make it clear to the Quebecois that they controlled their own destiny and that no longer were they to be seen as people without any agency who were

being acted upon. They also claimed most of north of the province which Quebec saw as a resource-rich area with vast hydroelectric potential.

The Quebecois did not look favourably on these aboriginal claims. "Today's newly independent nations are one and all against their own separatists or potential separatists..." Jane Jacobs had written in her book *The Question of Separatism*. "Finland after having achieved independence from Russia in 1918 promptly refused the right of self-determination to Aland...Pakistan having won its own separation, went on to fight the separation of East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. And so on. That is the way all nations behave...But this behaviour appears inconsistent only in the light of reason. The consistency is emotional and unreason-



able." And add to that list Quebec. Emotional and irrational. What is the point of separating only to have someone separate from you? And what is the point of separating as a European people in Canada if you can't take your "native people" with you eh! How can we be just like you and equal to you if we don't have our own "natives" to oppress.

If no one has told you yet, the aboriginal peoples did separate. Despite the much smaller size of the territory that came to be known as Quebec those stalwart "pures laines" still wanted out whatever the size of Quebec.

Dear Gwyniad:

You wanted me to explain the reason for my flip flop—from no to yes. Well it had to do with the First Nations. Given that they themselves supported the no side, I suppose I should have supported their position, but it seemed to me that with a yes vote, the First Nations people could probably exert some leverage to wrest some concessions from both the Quebecois and the Feds. I didn't believe for one minute that the Feds were any more interested in resolving First Nations issues than the Quebecois, but I hoped that a yes vote would force their hands. Would Quebec or Canada have actually used armed force against the Cree and Inuit? At the time I didn't know, but a yes vote, I reasoned, would foreground the issue of aboriginal rights and so speed resolution to some of the fundamental issues. Maybe I was being unrealistic, particularly given the First Nations opposition to separation. But I also felt that a yes vote would put to rest this incessant bleeding that affected Canada over what it was. As we now know Canada did survive.

Yo Sis Gwyniad:

Why me? Self-determination! You might have been thawed but you're still a hard woman asking some damn hard questions. But let me throw a hard question back your way sis Gwyn: was self-determination intended to be invoked by settler nations which shouldn't be where they are and which nine out of ten times had obtained the land they're presently on by tricking and jiving. Do you dig it sister?

This is not to say I'm not down with the Quebecois' historic sense of oppression and exploitation at the hands of the British. Although, as my ole granny used to say, "tief from tief only make god laugh." All those robber barons and thieves—the history books calling them mercantile interests—were only too ready, just like they are today—to impoverish people. All people. Black, white, yellow, pink and brown. And I'm really down with that class consciousness shit and all that. Remember *White Niggers of America*? The Quebec brother was trying to riff on what "nigger" meant to show the plight of the Quebecois in Canada. But guess what, Sis Gwyn, when you're white you can lose the "nigger" part of that title—as the Quebecois have. When you're black...well, I'll leave that for you to complete. So you see how this race business messes with the class question.

Well I'm outta here, Gwyn my sister. Stay good and warm, and no more hard questions.

Dear Gwyniad:

I feel real nervous writing to you. I read about what happening to you, how you been frozen in the snow for so long. I'm just an ordinary woman from the Caribbean who living here for the last

25 years. When I reading how you can't have children because of what happening to you I just wanted to write and talk to you about this Quebec thing.

I come from Grenada and when the 1995 referendum happening I was in Canada for about ten years. At the time I thinking that the whole thing not really having nothing to do with me. Why? Well like it was their own problem—you know what I mean. And sometimes there was so much hell coming down on Black people head that worrying about Quebec, or if Canada was going to stay together was a luxury. When you have pickney to feed and clothe and some boss man trying to pay you next to nothing and you know no welfare there to get, your head just get hot hot and that's all you thinking about.

But I telling you something that making me real angry at that time. It was when Mr. Bouchard making his statement about how Quebecois women having the lowest birthrate of the white races. Can you imagine? I didn't believe I was really hearing what I was hearing. The white women let him have it and I think he apologised, but it seemed like to me that those women were angry because they feeling that he insulting them as women—seeing them as only baby makers. They didn't really take him on because of the race part of what he saying. You see how these people really thinking.

Everybody smoothing out what he saying quick quick. And you know what I thinking about—how they breeding African women back in slavery time. You is a Black woman, you know what I talking about. But the really big buss up coming when on the night of the referendum—when the No side winning, Mr. Parizeau himself saying how is the ethnic vote and money that losing them the referendum. Then he saying that since the margin was so close how is only a matter of time before they winning. After that I figuring that they going to be setting up baby-making camps? Reason on it, my sister: when you take Mr. Parizeau's statement and put it together with Mr. Bouchard's statement about how white women not having enough babies wasn't that where they was heading? Breeding more white babies!

But then when you hearing how the media and the politicians in the rest of Canada trying to make out as if what Mr. Parizeau saying was so unusual, it just making you want to throw up. Mr. Parizeau shouldn't have said what he said. Is those kinds of comments that people taking to the streets to riot with. He doing the right thing by resigning. Mr. Bouchard should have resigned too. But what Mr. Parizeau saying no different from how plenty politicians, the media and ordinary white Canadians thinking in the rest of Canada. Look here, in this same city, some police strip-searching a Jamaican woman on a street corner not to long before that and they getting away with it. That telling you how they thinking about us. I don't know who they think they fooling by pretending they were so shocked. Look at the way they treating Black people and writing about them. As if we nothing but dirt. Mr. Parizeau must be letting the drink fly up in his head, but he only saying what plenty of them thinking.

Anyway, Gwyniad, I never do anything like this before—writing to an important figure, but I glad you coming back to life and I hope my letter helping you to understand Canada a little better.

Dear Gwyniad:

Love of a country is a strange and irrational emotion. Because of its irrationality it is a dangerous and potentially violent emotion.

But how to explain that emotion that can overwhelm you at the sight of a sunset, perhaps, the curve of a hill, the way sunshine glints on leaves, or the quiet of a frozen lake and snow-filled landscape, while at the same time leading to violence. On behalf of what? Those same feelings? The belief that somehow you're part of the very soil—the land?

That's the way I feel about the tiny piece of coral that I call home, floating in the Caribbean sea. A deep abiding love that simply will not die. No matter where or how far you travel. There's a fit so to speak, between you and the land. When the Quebecois speak of "notre pays" and love of it, I believe I understand what they mean. And more so if that love has been nurtured in the shadow of an exploitive relationship with a larger and more powerful entity. The danger is that this love of "notre pays" can explode into violence: to die for one's native land! Nothing more noble than that. To kill for one's native land!

Yo Sis Gwyniad:

Lies, lies and more lies! Politicians lie! I don't know if you ever knew that, but take my word for it. Then they lie some more. They always have. They always will. The 1995 referendum was a classic example of lies, lies and more lies. On both sides. But one of the biggest lies was the one that Quebec politicians laid on their people. Man those politicians had those sovereigntists believing that if they voted for sovereignty, it would ensure that they lived in a socialist paradise in North America. Vote yes! if you believe that you'll be allowed to keep your unemployment, your daycare, and your medicare system without user fees!

We pay for everything now, Gwyniad, but back then user fees was still dirty words. For the life of me I couldn't understand why those Quebecois people believed that they would be allowed to be the one country in the Americas with a fully developed social net. Did they really believe that all those suits running the international financial organizations and the bond brokers in New York would somehow come over all dewy-eyed and tender at the vision of these newly independent Quebecois still damp with the birth experience? Yes, sis Gwyn they did, they did. Suckas are born every minute and continue being suckas. They seemed to forget that the very same right-wing forces that went to work on the ROC would set to work on them. If nothing else, to let Quebec remain as an example of an alternative just would not be allowed. It's like Cuba and the USA. Working examples are more dangerous than talk and rhetoric.

I'm not saying that was reason for the Quebecois to vote No, but politicians need to be down with the people and be honest with them. But as I said honesty and politicians don't really go together.

You hang in there sister. I hear you're making great progress. Way to go!

Dear Gwyniad:

Greetings on your return to society. I am sure that it's very different from when you left. I hoped that the Yes side would win in the 1995 referendum. I wanted something definite and I didn't believe it would be the end of Canada, as you have seen for yourself.

"The threat to Canada isn't over yet. Not by a long shot...We've been sleepwalking toward extinction as a nation, and I hope last night was a wake up call for all of us." That was part of

a letter that was sent to me after the 1995 referendum. The extinction of Canada! Why would Canada be extinct, I thought. It wouldn't extend from sea, to sea but many many countries have survived amputations and continued: India, Pakistan, and Russia (when Finland achieved independence). Yes, there was the very real danger of violence as we had seen in the Yugoslavian example, but I wasn't sure why the letter writer thought Canada would become extinct. The people would still be there, I thought. So would the winter, so would all the natural resources that help to make this a great country.

When a significant percentage of a nation's people want to secede, how can you talk of a nation, extinct or otherwise, as if it were unmediated by this reality.

The sovereigntists may have lost the battle but they won the war. They succeeded in bringing the issue of Quebec to the consciousness of the nation in such a way that it could not go away. They had outed the rest of Canada, outed their love for Canada which was as passionate as the Quebecois'. Many Canadians had harboured a hidden love for this land and desired a wholeness which they saw as including Quebec. But just as the whole can be more than the sum of its parts, with Quebec's attitude at that time, the whole was infinitely less than the sum of its parts. There was already a hole in the whole that was Canada. And the closeness of the vote spoke to that; it was really only a matter of time before that fracturing became reality. What Canadians couldn't see was how they could be whole after Quebec. I knew they would be. They needed to believe in themselves.

Yo Gwyniad:

The nation is dead. Long live the nation! The Queer nation! The Black nation! The First Nations! Were we nations? Could you have a nation without a homeland; without shared boundaries; without shared languages. Could we abandon the notion of nation? Should we abandon the nation? Those were some of the questions that I was chilling out with in those far-off days in 1995. How would I feel if there was a possibility for a "homeland" for Africans in some part of the Americas? Man we have certainly put in some hard time and we have earned it. But, and there is a but there somewhere and I'm not sure why.

Maybe Canada is a space—a space where many nations can riff together within a common set of boundaries. There is a sort of fixity that is a part of "nation" when you think of it as being located in a specific space and time. But what about shifting nations? Nations and nationalities in constant flux, but in a positive way. So today you might be part of the Queer nation, but tomorrow part of the Black nation. Is that groovy or what? But we have to keep the damn politicians out of it, because you know they're going to fuck it up and as I told you they lie.

Anyway, Sister Gwyniad, all peace to you and I want to big you up for surviving the snow. Be talking to you and I'm outta here.

P.S. Gwyniad, one idea I was pushing back then in '95 was making one of the First Nations languages an official language. Mind you, somehow official and those languages don't go together—too much poetry. Anyway it didn't fly. Although thinking of Chretien trying speak one of those languages was enough to crack me up for a whole week. But it's still not too late. After-all, with Quebec gone we don't need French anymore. So why not Cree or Ojibway, I'm outta here.