

THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

Susan Crean

1. Taylor is a professor emeritus at McGill University and gave the CBC Massey Lectures in 1991, entitled *The Malaise of Modernity*. In 2007–08, he co-chaired Quebec's *Commission de consultation sur les pratiques d'accommodement reliées aux différences culturelles* with Gérard Bouchard.

2. Sákéj (James) Youngblood Henderson teaches at the University of Saskatchewan's Native Law Centre of Canada; he was the first Native North American to receive a doctorate in law from Harvard University.

3. Bourgault was a journalist, politician, and noted Quebec *indépendantiste*. He was a founder of the RIN (*Rassemblement pour l'indépendance nationale*) in 1960, becoming leader in 1964. In 1968, the RIN was disbanded and the movement folded into the newly formed Parti Québécois under leader René Lévesque. Bourgault became a professor of communications at UQAM (Université de Québec à Montréal) in the 1970s and for twenty years was the go-to commentator on Quebec politics for the English media.

« *Prennez vos rêves pour la réalité* »

(Take your dreams for reality)

Graffito, Paris, 1968

The term “public intellectual” has become popular in the last few years, and not just because Adrienne Clarkson was appointed Governor General and the press had to find a suitable way of describing her partner, writer John Ralston Saul. Generally, the term seems to apply to people who write on intellectual subjects, participate in the public debate, and who have thus become public figures themselves. Such individuals are not necessarily university professors, though often they are; freelance intellectuals show up regularly on college campuses, too, to give lectures, teach briefly, or (later in life) receive honorary degrees. So, on the one hand, we have internationally celebrated scholars like philosopher Charles Taylor,¹ who recently chaired Quebec's controversial commission on cultural diversity, and the Native Law Centre's Sákéj Henderson,² who advises governments and United Nations committees, as well as the Assembly of First Nations. On the other hand, there are the independents and mavericks like the late Jane Jacobs, essentially self-appointed observers and investigators whose credibility comes from a readership that follows their work and admires their ideas – a readership that includes other seriously engaged thinkers and scholars as well as the informed general public. This is a description that perfectly fits activist-intellectuals like the late Pierre Bourgault³ or Judy Rebick.⁴

In fact, being a public intellectual is not really a profession because it is not something you qualify for, or to which you are appointed. It is more like a role some people acquire or have thrust upon them – something you can only aspire to because it is, in the end, born of a social relationship and not just intellectual skill. In the public space where ideas and political action mix and debate takes place, ideas (and the people expressing them) can sometimes touch the public imagination. In such situations, a lone individual can have a huge influence, occasionally to the point of affecting history.⁵ But such

influence is not necessarily derived from personal involvement in politics much less a commitment to action, collective or otherwise. As the stereotype of the absent-minded professor reminds us, academics tend not to mix with activism.

University professors nevertheless do appear in public, usually as experts being interviewed or quoted on television and radio, or in books and blogs. Most don't make it into the mass media, though, and are generally unknown outside their own discipline.⁶ Of those who do venture into the public realm, a few ascend to a level of fame and recognition that gives them the authority to speak on issues beyond their academic expertise, which is arguably the mark of a fully fledged public intellectual. In that rare circle sit Ursula Franklin and John Polanyi, she a physicist and he a chemist, widely regarded as disinterested voices on nuclear and disarmament issues.⁷ You could think of them as non-Native equivalents of elders, voices of conscience and sober second thought. Both of them sit on committees and participate at public gatherings, and they do so as engaged and conscientious citizens, not just as intellectuals. The same can be said for Taylor, but the fact is that few academics engage with the public in this way, and this suggests that tenure, intended as job protection for scholars whose research might be contentious and as a bulwark against censorship, is not being put to the test by professors who support unpopular causes, or take on the powerful. Indeed, there has traditionally been a limit on how much plain "public profile" is acceptable in academia even when it has nothing to do with causes. Back in the 1960s, David Suzuki and Marshall McLuhan were both criticized for pandering to the masses, the inference being that academic credibility is undermined if you appear on television too often. Only very recently has media celebrity become a good career move.⁸

In Europe, on the other hand, there has long been a tradition of public intellectuals participating in politics as well as the mainstream media. Think of Jean-Paul Sartre marching with the students and Renault workers in the streets during *les événements* (general strike) of May 1968. Think of the long-running French television program on books and ideas, *Apostrophes*. In Quebec, too, "*les intellectuels engagés*" (intellectual activists) have been thick on the ground, and on both sides of the sovereignty debate (Léon Dion, Fernand Dumont, Marcel Rioux, Guy Rocher). So naturally the dragnet unleashed by

4. Rebeck was CAW-Sam Gindin Chair of Social Justice and Democracy at Ryerson University. Gindin was himself an academic and committed community activist.

5. For example, Václav Havel – the dissident playwright and charismatic leader of the Velvet Revolution that helped topple the Soviet Union in 1989 – became the first president of the Czech Republic.

6. Who had heard of the University of British Columbia's Michael Smith when he won the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1993, or the University of Toronto's Donald Coxeter, heralded as one of the greatest geometers of the twentieth century, when he died in 2003?

7. The idea of the disinterested citizen – "disinterested" as in unfettered by private or vested interests, and free to speak for the public good – is central to the arguments of John Ralston Saul in his Massey Lectures of 1995, *The Unconscious Civilization*.

8. For example, Richard Florida, author of *The Rise of the Creative Class*, is professor of business and creativity at the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto.

the invocation of the War Measures Act in October and November 1970 yielded a few university professors along with scores of writers, singers, and political organizers. (Among those jailed was the poet Gérard Godin, who went on to defeat Premier Robert Bourassa in the election of 1976.) The traditions of English Canada, with its British-based university system, are notably different, more reserved, and colonial-minded. Even so, there have been serious activists in the ranks of tenured professors, and some have become public figures – for example, political economist Mel Watkins, now professor emeritus at the University of Toronto, who was a key player in the Waffle (also known as the Movement for an Independent Socialist Canada), and sociologists Lynn McDonald and Sunera Thobani, who both served as president of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women. More recently, law professor and copyright activist Michael Geist has taken his cause online.⁹



9. Geist, the Canada Research Chair in Internet and e-Commerce Law at the University of Ottawa, writes a weekly column on technology law called “Law Bytes” that appears in several Canadian media outlets, and in 2007 instigated on Facebook a protest against proposals to amend the Copyright Act that recruited 25,000 supporters in a matter of days.

10. This term for non-WASP immigrants was current at the time, as was the “Third Force,” which referred to the fact that many incoming Canadians were neither English- nor French-speaking.

The whole concept of the public intellectual changed in the 1970s with the emergence of independent scholars and writers in English Canada, people who researched and wrote on their own without institutional backing, John Ralston Saul among them. Journalists like Pierre Berton, June Callwood, and Farley Mowat started writing long and serious books about history, biography, and science in the 1960s, attracting a large and non-expert audience. Following them came a generation of freelance non-fiction writers, often writing from the margins, almost always dealing with lost or unpleasant truths. Because of the social-justice movements alive at the time – feminism, Red Power, minority rights – many communities were looking for a reflection in the media of their reality and not finding it. It was an era when women, gays, Native people, les Québécois, and New Canadians¹⁰ were making cultural as well as political demands. These writers were often activists themselves; they were also storytellers and survivors, and the works they created rose from their own experience and their own encounters with history. There was Maria Campbell’s *Halfbreed*, about her life as a Michif (Métis) woman; Myrna Kostash’s *All of Baba’s Children*, about Ukrainian roots in Alberta; Cassie Brown’s retelling of the 1914 Newfoundland sealing disaster, *Death on the Ice*; and Ken Adachi’s *The Enemy That Never*

Was. This was not history as historians wrote it, but the subjects were no less important and compelling, and the research was first-hand. Moreover, these writers increasingly crossed into the mainstream for they, too, could give interviews and lectures, and the exposure catapulted some of them onto the national stage. Born out of political protest, they ended up establishing a tradition that combines alternative journalism and community with literary expression.

The 1980s produced a stream of public intellectuals working in a variety of fields and literary genres, talking about politics from a diversity of perspectives. Among them, for example, were novelist Joy Kogawa and playwright Tomson Highway, whose creative work merged with the political and cultural movements of their times. They gave voice and substance to a new way of seeing history, contributing personally to the redress movement in Kogawa's case, and to the establishment of Native theatre in Highway's.¹¹ Other charismatic and (often) dissident voices, such as Linda McQuaig on the economy and Maude Barlow on sovereignty, have emerged since, speaking to the big questions of contemporary life and delivering both good news and bad. They have tackled increasingly ambitious subjects that demand extensive and arduous research – think, for example, of the historical biographies of Charlotte Gray (on Susanna Moodie, Catharine Parr Traill, and E. Pauline Johnson) and Maggie Siggins (on Louis Riel), Ken McGoogan's work on Arctic history, and Afua Cooper and Lawrence Hill on slavery. As poet and nature writer Harry Thurston once remarked to me: "Each of my books is a PhD thesis." And the next generation is even grander in its purview: Irshad Manji on Islam and world culture, Naomi Klein on globalization.

Roy Miki came of age in the early part of this period of cultural expansion. He is one of those individuals who has been active in several communities, giving blood to multiple causes and belonging in many contexts. As an academic, he was engaged in the highly public effort that resulted in redress for the internment of Japanese Canadians; as an artist he was embroiled in the controversial Writing Thru Race conference organized by the Writers' Union of Canada in 1994. I met Roy in the late 1980s when issues of race were first being debated in the union, having been raised originally by Lenore Keeshig-Tobias and Daniel David Moses. In 1989, a Racial Minority Writers committee was set up with Keeshig-Tobias in charge.

11. Kogawa's novel about the internment of Japanese Canadians, *Obasan*, was quoted in the House of Commons when the redress agreement was signed on September 22, 1988. Tomson Highway was artistic director of the Native theatre company Native Earth Performing Arts.

The following spring this committee hosted a gathering called *The Appropriate Voice*, May 21 to 24, 1992, which brought together writers of colour, members and non-members alike, to discuss common problems. We did this for the simple reason that few writers of colour were joining the union, and fewer still were prepared to take on the double task of raising race as a political issue in Canadian writing and publishing, and raising the consciousness of the largely white union membership. The union could not credibly convene such a meeting without reaching beyond its membership. So that's what we did. Broke the cookie jar, as dub poet Lillian Allen put it.

Not long after, Roy proposed an even bigger national conference to be held in Vancouver. The plan was to host a series of public workshops in the months leading up to the event, to stimulate interest and conversation in the broader community. It was during one of these workshops in Toronto that Makeda Silvera (writer and editor of *Sister Vision Press*) famously quit the panel she was part of when Pierre Berton vociferously denounced the idea of a meeting that barred some of the union's own members "on the basis of the colour of their skin" (Tator, Henry, and Mattis 90). Hold the meeting, he said, but don't ask for taxpayers' money. The audience applauded; Silvera noted she, too, paid taxes and with that left the stage. Berton's contention was one of several variations on this theme of reverse-racism that swirled around *Writing Thru Race*. To Silvera and the union leadership, the conference was, on the contrary, an exercise in inclusion and no more "exclusive" than a meeting of women writers, say, or of crime writers. (Or the union itself, most of the time.) If it constituted "discrimination," it was of the kind permitted by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Moreover, both the event and the committee Roy convened to make it happen were hugely and richly diverse – more so than any other collaboration in my personal experience. And, although Berton disagreed, a majority felt that the union had a responsibility to facilitate the efforts of minority writers to organize on their own terms, which was why the membership had mandated the creation of a Status of Women Writers committee and then the Racial Minority Writers committee in the first place.¹²

Hardly any attention had been paid to *The Appropriate Voice*, which took place the year I chaired the union (1991–92), but two years later when *Writing Thru Race* happened the world tuned in. Three weeks before it was due to open, the Minister of Canadian

12. For an analysis of *Writing Thru Race*, see Carol Tator, Frances Henry, and Winston Mattis's *Challenging Racism in the Arts*. The Racial Minority Writers committee was renamed the Social Justice Task-force in 1998.

Heritage Michel Dupuy announced in the House he was renegeing on a \$22,500 grant that had been approved and was awaiting his signature. He, too, described the event as “exclusive.” Artists at a meeting in Vancouver were the first to react. Visual artist Paul Wong told the gathering about the cancellation and began taking donations. He felt it essential that artists not accept direction from government about how and who they could meet. Moreover, Dupuy’s denouncement played to a double standard that did not see an all-white union as racially exclusive, but could dismiss a meeting for people of colour as discriminatory. Despite the fact that white writers were involved with Writing Thru Race, as part of the organizing team and in the audience at the plenary readings, Dupuy and others claimed white people were excluded. Undaunted by the media storm, Roy’s committee got on the phones and within two weeks raised almost twice the amount lost, from writers (including Pierre Berton), the union movement, and other supporters. The windfall was made possible, in part, by the several thousand dollars’ worth of free publicity provided by all those editorials, opinion pieces, letters, and talk-show debates.

I often wondered how this looked to Roy’s colleagues peering down from the heights of Burnaby Mountain. Here he was once again embroiled in a nasty public debate. For even though the *Vancouver Sun* was unique among major Canadian dailies in supporting Writing Thru Race, the conference was not an easy sell in the mainstream cultural community in Vancouver. *BC Bookworld*, for example, ignored it. Here was a magnificent moment for white critics, tenured academics, and public intellectuals to stand up to be counted. Very few did.

To me, Roy is the consummate public intellectual – an academic who understands that ivory-tower walls have a way of keeping people in as well as keeping the hubbub out. He is a poet who theorizes on the intersection of racialism, memory, and language; an artist who is an editor and community organizer; and a conscientious citizen committed to social justice and the rights of artists. In short, he is an outspoken scholar who takes the time to write cultural history. And in doing all this, he made cultural history himself.