

## Folk Art and Ethnicity on the Prairies: Lysenko, Kurelek, Suknaski and Sapp

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**ABSTRACT.** In the past, ethnic folk art and artifacts of the First Nations peoples have contributed to a rich storehouse of people's art on the Prairies. More recently, individual folk artists in western Canada, often drawing upon communitarian and ethnic heritages, have developed a significant presence in the arts, particularly in the field of naive painting. The art of the prairie vernacular is notable, in fact, in the work of a number of modern artists, both untutored and academic, who create, in several disciplines, out of folk art sensibilities. Four exceptional artists, who exercise the psychology of modern folk artists by making their evocative memories of folk life their subject matter and interpreting them in a highly emotive narrative style, are writers Vera Lysenko and Andy Suknaski, and painters William Kurelek and Allen Sapp.

**SOMMAIRE.** L'art et l'artisanat ethniques des peuples autochtones ont traditionnellement contribué à la richesse de l'art populaire des Prairies. Plus récemment, les artistes populaires individuels du Canada de l'ouest, s'inspirant souvent des patrimoines communautaires et ethniques, se sont signalés par leur présence dans les arts, et plus spécialement dans la peinture naïve. Cet art local est remarquable, en fait, dans le travail de nombreux artistes modernes, inexercés aussi bien qu'académiques, qui puisent à la sensibilité populaire leurs créations dans plusieurs disciplines. Nous allons nous pencher ici sur quatre artistes exceptionnels, qui pratiquent la psychologie de l'art populaire moderne en prenant pour sujet leurs souvenirs évocateurs et en leur donnant un style narratif passionné: les écrivains Vera Lysenko et Andy Suknaski, et les peintres William Kurelek et Allen Sapp.

From the 1960s on, as modernism gave way to postmodern realities, artists on the cultural margins gradually moved to the cultural centres. The western art world was transformed as "a variety of movements in Europe and North America emerged to question the roles, the methods and the very purpose of art."<sup>1</sup> The feminist movement, for example, allowed for the reclamation of lost female artists, the revisioning of traditional art histories and the introduction of a new, primary role for women in the arts. As well, during the last forty years, under diverse influences, the boundaries between traditional aesthetic genres have blurred and the distinctions between the fine arts, folk art and popular culture have thinned. Indeed, postmodern realities have led, in some measure, particularly in the recent past, to the privileging of artist outsiders — such as inmates of mental institutions and their "Art brut."<sup>2</sup> In Canada, folk art, legitimized by folk art scholars like Edith Fowke, Marius Barbeau, and George Swinton, and traditionally understood as art created by untutored artists outside the art academy, has also flourished as "outsider" art.

For the folk art specialist, issues of definition and classification are paramount. For Blake McKendry, folk art is "the imaginative skill of the people in general" and includes such branches and subbranches, albeit with mutable and overlapping boundaries, as primitive, naive, provincial, ethnic, and folk-culture artifacts.<sup>3</sup> During the 1970s and 1980s, both McKendry and J. Russell Harper, an early folk art scholar, saw artifacts from Native cultures as belonging to the first branch, to primitive folk art of pre-literate cultures, while at the same time acknowledging the conscious adaptation of the characteristics of primitive folk art by superior academic artists, such as Picasso. In the most contemporary folk art scholarship, the designation of "primitive" to traditional Native folk art has become extremely problematic, because as C. Perrin

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1 Maria Tippett, *By a Lady: Celebrating Three Centuries of Art by Canadian Women* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1993), 153.

2 Michael D. Hall and Eugene W. Metcalfe, Jr., eds., *The Artist Outsider: Creativity and the Boundaries of Culture* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), xiii.

3 Blake McKendry, *Folk Art* (Agincourt: Methuen, 1983), 18.

explains, the term is used as an expression of an inherently disparaging evolutionary scheme developed by Western culture to designate its own superiority. As well, most displays of "primitive art," and artistic commentaries on this genre, have been presented in ignorance of the belief systems and cultural contexts that inform them. Thus we have been able to apprehend little more than the "formal qualities and technical energies" of what has been designated as primitive art.<sup>4</sup>

In the past, the western Plains have been a rich repository of both the "primitive" folk art of the various tribes of Native peoples, and the folk culture of ethnic settlement, where early immigration created polyglot but homogenous communities. In effect, ethnic and First Nations folk art on the Prairies have made and continue to make, albeit often in new and transformational guises, significant contributions to the folk art traditions and the "people's art" of Canada. Despite the thorny questions of ownership, appropriation, and lack of full understanding of cultural and spiritual contexts, First Nations artifacts of the Plains tribes, housed in the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, for example, remain a fascinating heritage. Other ethnic communities have left a legacy of folk art customs and artifacts that include Ukrainian dancing, easter eggs and embroidery, Doukhobor furniture and Hutterite samplers. Such ethnic folk art, defined by Blake McKendry as art "which is characterized by the cultural, religious, or linguistic traditions of a people or country"<sup>5</sup> is at its most pristine when it is expressive of longstanding community heritage, of traditional practices and designs. Not surprisingly, given the impact of modern influences and the creative impulses of individual artists, ethnic folk art on the Prairies, including Native art, has dramatically transformed over time from the collective to the individual. As William Taylor explains: "In the past, folk art was essentially collective but a pronounced tendency towards individuality has now appeared. Originally, folk artists represented their communities... . Today, large numbers of folk artists express themselves more as individuals, and their work increasingly reveals personal dimensions."<sup>6</sup>

In western Canada, individual folk artists have developed a significant presence in the arts, particularly in the field of naive painting, where untrained painters, such as Irene McCaugherty, have become recognized signature artists in fine arts galleries. As early as 1955, the National Gallery sponsored an exhibit of fifty-seven naive paintings by six artists, entitled *Folk Painters of the Canadian West*.<sup>7</sup> Many of the West's celebrated folk painters have been motivated to create directly out of their own ethnic backgrounds. A good example is Saskatchewan's Molly Lenhardt, whose iconic portraits of Ukrainian peasant women in ethnic costume were inspired by new world experience and "the pain endured in settling here."<sup>8</sup> Others re-create from their "old country" memory. Jeanne Thomarat's richly coloured, charming portrait of her native France, *Les Pamplémousses*, is often reproduced in arts magazines; and Jahan Maka, a Lithuanian immigrant to Manitoba based his art on remembered Lithuanian history and folk life, achieving international status as a "symbolist on the precambrian shield."<sup>9</sup> For a number of naive painters, ethnicity and region are conflated in art.

4 Constance Perrin, "The Reception of New, Unusual and Difficult Art," in Hall and Metcalfe, eds., *The Artist Outsider*, 187-88.

5 See McKendry, *Folk Art*, 22.

6 William Taylor, *From the Heart: Folk Art in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1983), 14.

7 McKendry, *Folk Art*, 16.

8 "Prairie Folk Art," *artscanada* (1977-78): 8.

9 Michael D. Hall, "Jahan Maka: Symbolist on the Precambrian Shield," in Hall and Metcalfe, eds., *The Artist Outsider*, 124-42.

Irene McCaugherty, for example, who has memorialized the region around Fort Macleod in her work, in some of her best paintings of early life on the Prairies includes images of Hutterite girls picking berries and apples, and renderings of Native encampments.

Clearly, the communitarian and ethnic folk cultures of the West sowed the seeds for a future of remarkably populist artistic activity that would include notable achievements by a number of modern artists, both academic and untutored. Among those who have drawn their artistic inspirations directly from ethnic or Aboriginal community and folk art sensibilities are writers Vera Lysenko and Andy Suknaski, and painters William Kurelek and Allen Sapp. These are artists of special merit who exercise the psychology of modern folk artists by making their evocative memories of community and ethnic folk life on the Prairies their subject matter, and by interpreting the folk lives of their people in a highly emotive narrative style. Each artist does so, however, with unique artistry and singular vision. Lysenko, Kurelek and Suknaski are intellectual, academic artists who self-consciously adopt folk style and ethnicity in art, while Sapp, who is unable to read and write, is a painter of intuitive genius. All four are remarkable artists in their own right and noteworthy contributors to the continuous corpus of people's art on the Prairies.

Vera Lysenko (1919-1975), like the nationally reknown painter, William Kurelek, was an historical chronicler of Ukrainian-Canadian peasant heritage. Lysenko, born Vera Lesik to Stundist Ukrainian parents who emigrated to Canada in 1903, was a second generation ethnic writer whose social mission was to make her ethnic group visible in the larger culture. Her first book, *Men in Sheepskin Coats: A Study in Assimilation* (1947), documents the contribution of Ukrainian pioneers in the West. At the same time, as the title of her book suggests, Lysenko nominally accepted the assimilationist ideal of mainstream culture, and was an early apostle of the renewed nationalism that accompanied it in mid-twentieth century Canada. Both in *Men in Sheepskin Coats* and her novel *Yellow Boots* (1954, rpt. 1992), she provided an ideal futuristic concept of the gradual multicultural blending of all ethnic groups into a new, dynamic, if undefined, Canadian culture.<sup>10</sup>

While *Yellow Boots*, like John Marlyn's classic novel of immigrant life, *Under the Ribs of Death*, is significant as a sociopolitical text of the struggles of the second-generation immigrant in the West, and as a polemic of multiculturalism, it is also an artistic curiosity, a work that puzzles as it fails to meet the standards of Canadian literary high art, or to follow any predicable conventions of the novel genre. For the interdisciplinary critic, *Yellow Boots* ultimately resists discussion through the sole use of the critical vocabulary of the literary arts. As an anomalous and unique work *Yellow Boots* is best understood as a literary version of ethnic folk art, even a folk art artifact, like the precious objects Lysenko nostalgically describes in the foreword to her work: "Over the years, her [the heroine's] people learned to conform, to yield much of their peasant tradition, since there was so little they could interpose against the robot uniformity of industrialization — only a few symbols of an outmoded life, a carved chest, a folk song, a pair of yellow boots ... the treasure of folk lore."<sup>11</sup>

10 See Frances Swyripa, *Ukrainian Canadians: A Survey of Their Portrayal in English-Language Works* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1977) and Alexandra Kryvoruchka, "Introduction," *Yellow Boots* (Edmonton: NeWest Press and Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 1992) for discussion of Lysenko's political beliefs.

11 Vera Lysenko, *Yellow Boots* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1954), v.

From a conventional literary perspective, *Yellow Boots* as a novel has a minimal plot. The story revolves around the childhood of a young girl, Lilli, in a Ukrainian peasant immigrant family on the Manitoba prairie in the 1920s and 1930s. The girl, by instinct an artist, a singer, eventually migrates to the city where she becomes a domestic, then a factory work and by the story's end, a successful dressmaker and prominent folk singer of immigrant songs on the Prairies. Structurally, the fiction is oddly balanced, with little plot development in five of six parts devoted to Lilli's childhood experiences. Here the plot advances slightly through simple anecdotal situations, but the real emphasis is on the ethnic context of Lilli's life, on a full and ecstatic imagistic presentation and recording of Ukrainian peasant rites, customs and folklore under such broad folkloric headings as "Rites of Spring" and "Songs of the Seasons."

In literary criticism,<sup>12</sup> *Yellow Boots* has been identified as conforming to both modernist literary genres of the *bildungsroman* and the *kunstlerroman*, the former designed to trace the education of a hero or heroine, and the latter, the development of an artist. In fact, it is arguable that the fiction is both and even sets something of an historical precedent by articulating a populist *kunstlerroman* with a folk artist as protagonist. *Yellow Boots* can be seen as a nouveau postmodern metafictional inquiry into the education of the folk artist and the processes and products of folk art expression even as the narrative itself becomes a folk paean to Ukrainian folk life.

Lysenko presents clear instructions about the shaping influences in the development of a Ukrainian Canadian prairie folk artist. Like the painter Paul Gaugin, who was one of the first to use folk-art style in formal painting, Lysenko underlines the folk art tenet that naive art springs intuitively "from the spirit without the overlay of civilization," and that this spirit "makes immediate, unintellectualized use of nature."<sup>13</sup> Throughout the fiction, Lysenko details both the community's and Lilli's artistic inspirations as born of centuries of tradition based in the natural world. On the Prairies, Lilli is a child of nature who is rhapsodically inspired by song all about her: by the sounds of church bells, the birds, even the insects. When she sings "in a kind of ancestral chant," the wind is "a natural accompaniment."<sup>14</sup> Even when Lilli matures and is faced with conventions of formal musical culture in the city, tutored singers learn from her as "she sings from the soul, as the birds sing."<sup>15</sup> In *Yellow Boots*, Lysenko creates Lilli as the apogee of the primitive artist of slavic soul who is one with the forces of nature.

Clearly *Yellow Boots* is a tribute to the vernacular in art — not to the vernacular narrowly defined as the representation of ethnic or regional speech patterns (which, in fact Lysenko does not re-create) but to the vernacular as understood by folklorist J. Russell Harper in contemplation of naive painting: "art that reflects local ways of life." For Harper, "The best paintings of the vernacular have an almost musical quality which relates them spiritually to folk song."<sup>16</sup> For Lysenko, too, music and image are integral to the folk art composition of *Yellow Boots*. Lysenko is a passionate celebrant

12 For detailed literary analysis of *Yellow Boots*, see Beverly Rasporich, "Retelling Vera Lysenko: A Feminist and Ethnic Writer," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 21, no. 2 (1989) 38-52; "Vera Lysenko's Fictions: Engendering Prairie Spaces," *Prairie Forum* 16, no. 2 (1991): 249-63.

13 McKendry, *Folk Art*, 62.

14 Lysenko, *Yellow Boots*, 51-52.

15 *Ibid.*, 238.

16 J. Russell Harper, *A People's Art: Primitive, Naive, Provincial and Folk Painting in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 4.

of folk song who has her heroine choose the role of folk singer over that of concert artist; the author attempts, as well, to capture the spirit of folk music through language, while simultaneously relating the cultural significance of the songs/sounds as they existed for the first generation Ukrainian immigrants. The following spectacle of Ukrainian peasants bursting spontaneously into song and choral harmony is described as an act expressive of an ancient history of persecution, and a longing for freedom: "The tenor, singing almost in a falsetto, initiated the melody, elaborated upon it, prolonged the piercing note until the whole countryside seemed to express the profound sorrow of a persecuted people. The chanting, in polyphonic harmony swelled in a crescendo as the soaring voices poured forth their melody. The whole prairie had come to life."<sup>17</sup> Although Lysenko ably instructs her reader in the equation of folk life and music, and convincingly describes the peasant's musical ecstasy, she is less successful in re-creating aural musical soundscape through the medium of the written word than she is in imaging Ukrainian peasant rites.

In *Yellow Boots*, Lysenko provides visual images that are as sentient as the naive paintings of the best contemporary folk painters of the Prairies. Her own metaphor for describing the spontaneous choral group on the country road can be applied to her visual techniques: "The two men gazed in silence at the scene, which was like a painting by some primitive artist wielding a huge brush and throwing colour from his palette in a kind of frenzy. Everything was exaggerated — the people, the music, the landscape."<sup>18</sup> In her description of cultural rites and festivals, Lysenko exercises a mastery of such formal characteristics of the painter's art as colour, design and texture with the bold extravagance of the "primitive artist." Here the striking coloured and textured image of Ukrainian girl in costume is typical: "her eyes appeared dark and enormous, her mouth fuller and of a richer colour; her hair, braided and twined with flowers, shone with a new gloss. Slowly Lilli passed her hands over her costume — her white linen blouse, her pleated blue skirt, her satin bodice." Lysenko also demonstrates a technical virtuosity of the vernacular style that fuses music with image when she grounds visual image in musical metaphor in the following quick sketch of dancing girls: "The wide accordion-pleated satin skirts of the girls undulated in spirals according to the dance, and the recurring note seemed to be a bright blue shade." Similarly, "Another brilliant note was the breastplate of gold coins worn by the woman Tamara. Her entire chest was covered by coins, about seventy-five of them, and great hoop earrings of gold dangled in her ears. The third strong colour note was provided by the yellow boots of Fialka."<sup>19</sup>

As people's artists, Vera Lysenko the writer and William Kurelek (1927-1977) the painter, whose early life was spent in a Ukrainian Canadian farm community in Manitoba, obviously had much in common. Like Kurelek who painted with a "naive vision,"<sup>20</sup> Lysenko, too, embraced in fiction such characteristics of the naive folk painter as child-like joy, spontaneity, simplicity, directness — even exaggeration. When Laurence Ricou in his classic analysis of prairie fiction in 1978 interpreted Lysenko's rhapsodizing of the Prairies as "glib" and "excessive,"<sup>21</sup> he perhaps over-

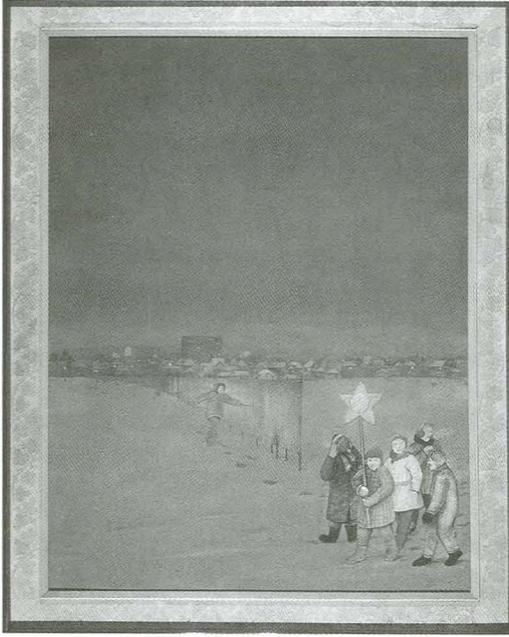
17 Lysenko, *Yellow Boots*, 10.

18 *Ibid.*, 117.

19 *Ibid.*

20 McKendry, *Folk Art*, 31.

21 Laurence Ricou, *Vertical Man/Horizontal World: Man in Landscape in Canadian Prairie Fiction* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1973), 112.



William Kurelek, *Young Ukrainian Church Carollers* (courtesy the Collection of Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta).

looked her folk art sensibility. Her expressive feeling is perfectly compatible with the naive artist's "joyous expression" and the vernacular art that traditionally emanates from rural life, where "men and women of the farm and village record their thoughts in spontaneous, uncomplicated fashion following personal fancy and feeling."<sup>22</sup> Kurelek, of course, is celebrated for his simple folk art feeling in his naively rendered, emotive paintings of Ukrainian immigrant pioneer life and childhood experience on the Prairies. His painting *Young Ukrainian Church Carollers* (1974), for example, shows a group of five young boys on a prairie landscape of snow and vast sky, bearing a religious icon, while a sixth caroller rushes to catch up with the others. The young men are naively drawn, like a child's imaging of people, and the feelings conveyed by the painting are those of childhood sensations of snow and of cold,

but at the same time pleasurable physicality. Lysenko, too, creates a multiplicity of enchanted Kurelek-like folk portraits, such as the following from the chapter "The Immigrant Carollers." As the carollers approach, "Lilli, followed by a swarm of children, ran to the window and placed a candle on the sill as a sign of consent to the carollers. In the light of the candle, faces and shapes were seen — first of all three bearded strangers appeared, and behind them a throng of neighbours pressed, their sheepskin coats familiar, but their faces transformed by the radiance of the night. Bowing low, the three strangers approached the house..."<sup>23</sup>

Although both Lysenko's word pictures and Kurelek's paintings are the interpretations of the creative artist, they are also ethnocentric, in the collective and communal tradition of the historical folk artist. Ukrainian identity and community, however, was probably a greater passion for Lysenko than for Kurelek. While Lysenko had a determined social mission, Kurelek did not, and came only gradually to recognize the significance of his own ethnicity. As he sought to discover himself both as an individual and a painter, he engaged in what he himself described in a Canadian Ethnic Studies Conference in 1973 as "one man's odyssey towards ethnic awareness,"<sup>24</sup> a journey that ultimately included commitment to ethnic community, as demonstrated through his show to honour his mother (*Ukrainian Women in Canada*, 1968),

22 Harper, *A People's Art*, 6-7.

23 Lysenko, *Yellow Boots*, 84.

24 Patricia Morley, *Kurelek* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1986), 203-4.

as well as by his inspirational six-part mural celebrating the role and achievements of Ukrainian pioneers in the Canadian West, hung in the House of Commons in 1983.<sup>25</sup>

In their commitment to preserving communal artistic traditions, ethnic folk artists are essentially conservative. As Michael Bird explains, the virtue of ethnic folk artifacts is "not a creative departure from the past, but a conservative resistance to change."<sup>26</sup> Typically, nostalgia is a dominant emotion in both Lysenko's and Kurelek's art. Both artists convey a sense of a dying past in an advancing future, of folk life memorialized. Kurelek's *Lumberjack* paintings are prefaced with, "As a painter, I feel very lucky to have experienced traditional lumber camp living before it disappeared forever"<sup>27</sup>; and Lysenko has a prairie schoolteacher make a telling comment about the passage of folk life in *Yellow Boots*: "It is though an anachronism of circumstances had produced a genuine folk poet in this isolated Boukovinian community of Manitoba. I feel almost as though I were a spectator of history delayed; it's like seeing a film run backward."<sup>28</sup>

For both artists, too, the machine age and technology were a threat to Ukrainian artisan culture, as well as to the arts and craft traditions, which, as Anna Balan suggests in Kurelek's biography, were for Ukrainian women "their aesthetic pleasure."<sup>29</sup> His biographer also tells us that Kurelek was typically enthralled with old Ukrainian pioneer structures and cellars lined with preserves and root vegetables; while Lysenko, in like feeling, devotes a chapter to the art of pickling with sensate descriptions of the likes of *maritura*, "pickles ... made of string beans with carrots, oil and onions ... fermented by a pound lump of dough, placed in the pickle and allowed to ripen for ten days" and a "kolach sprinkled with caraway seeds, a bag of dried mushrooms and a cottage cheese, all wrapped up in a white cloth."<sup>30</sup> Like the prairie sculptor Victor Cicansky, whose ceramic illusions such as *Preserves* (1979), jars of cucumbers, beets and pickled corn, are remarkably inviting, felt pieces, Lysenko and Kurelek create in "appreciation for the efforts of the pioneers, for values of the society we inherited today."<sup>31</sup>

Both Lysenko and Kurelek chose to celebrate and record the best of Ukrainian folkways. As typical second-generation children of immigrant parents on the Prairies, they straddled two cultural worlds and social classes: the high art and literate world provided by their university educations, and the peasant ethnic culture of their early experience. As a practicing artist, Kurelek ultimately adopted a peasant value system, perhaps even a peasant pietism. His religious conversion to Catholicism prompted didactic paintings with religious messages and iconic elements within a rural context but his best known works illustrate pioneer industry and practical living while projecting a strong narrative interest based on lived experience. According to Barry Lord, Kurelek's was the "realistic outlook of the farmer and worker"<sup>32</sup>; arguably, his attitude was also that of the folk artist.

25 Ibid., 205, 224.

26 Michael Bird, *Canadian Folk Art: Old Ways in a New Land* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1983), 2.

27 William Kurelek, *Lumberjack* (Montreal: Tundra Books, 1974), n.p.

28 Lysenko, *Yellow Boots*, 53.

29 Morley, *Kurelek*, 211.

30 Lysenko, *Yellow Boots*, 101.

31 Victor Cicansky in "Prairie Folk Art," *artscanada*, 15.

32 Barry Lord, *The History of Painting in Canada: Towards a People's Art* (Toronto: NC Press, 1974), 220.

However much Kurelek appropriated a naive style or point of view, he was not, however, a naive painter. He received a sophisticated fine arts education at the University of Manitoba, and studied at the Instituto Allende art in Mexico, the Ontario College of Art, as well as in England. His early work, the *trompe l'oeil* he created in England to support himself, suggests a master of drawing, and his artistic oeuvre demonstrates a variety of aesthetic genres. In effect, as a folk artist or people's painter, influenced by painters like Brueghels, Kurelek found a compatible style to express his prairie, populist immigrant vision and a recovered childhood identity. In 1983 it was an outsider's position, as demonstrated by the art critic Charlotte Townsend-Gault who penned this puzzled assessment: "Kurelek presents an awkward challenge to the contemporary art historian's habitual categories; the only point of agreement might be that he cannot be ignored. Jan Wyers in Saskatchewan, George Sawchuk on the West Coast and Arthur Villeneuve in Quebec are others, who, for all their profound differences, have this in common with Kurelek; they do not belong to the mainstream of art by any definition..."<sup>33</sup>

Both Lysenko and Kurelek were prairie contributors to what art critic Barry Lord appropriately called, in reference to Kurelek, "new democratic art."<sup>34</sup> Both artists, inspired by Ukrainian heritage, also looked beyond their own ethnicity to an ideal, inclusive multiculturalism that was partly invoked by the immigrant realities of the West. Lysenko's heroine folk singer in *Yellow Boots* not only gives flesh and voice to her own people but at the novel's end, sings to and for the cosmopolitan folk audience "of almost every European and Asiatic origin."<sup>35</sup> In effect, Lysenko has her heroine reject fine arts culture in favour of a utopian socialist vision that was compatible with the author's own sociopolitical leanings. Kurelek, who saw himself as a citizen of the world, also experienced and applauded multiculturalism. At least in his comments on his *Lumberjack* series of paintings, he memorializes the bushcamps of northwestern Ontario and the immigrant nationalities of the men who worked them: Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Polish, Finnish, German, Estonian. One painting, *After the Sauna*, captures the icy exhilaration of plunging stark naked into a lake, an experience Kurelek describes as one of "glorious nudity every few days for the lumberjack in camps influenced by Finnish culture."<sup>36</sup>

The multicultural idealism of Lysenko and Kurelek as modern "folk" artists of the Canadian West, also underlies the vernacular poetry of Andy Suknaski (born 1942), who created a body of remarkable work in the 1970s and 1980s including *Wood Mountain Poems* (1976), *Octomi* (1976), *East of Myloonat* (1979), *The ghosts call you poor* (1980), *In the Name of Narid* (1981), *Montage for an Interstellar Cry* (1982), *Silk Trail* (1985), and a collection of old and new poetry, *The Land They Gave Away* (1986). Like Lysenko and Kurelek, Suknaski was born to first generation immigrant homesteaders on the Prairies, in Saskatchewan's Wood Mountain area. A consummate "cultural outsider," Suknaski, son of a Ukrainian father and a Polish mother, failed his first year in public school because it took him two weeks "simply to learn the word 'I'."<sup>37</sup> For

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33 Charlotte Townsend-Gault in R. Bringhurst et al., eds., *Visions: Contemporary Art in Canada* (Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre, 1983), 133.

34 Lord, *The History of Painting in Canada*, 220.

35 Lysenko, *Yellow Boots*, 311.

36 Kurelek, *Lumberjack*, 13.

37 Andrew Suknaski in Jars Balan (ed.), *Identifications: Ethnicity and the Writer in Canada* (Edmonton: The Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies), 70.

critic Michael Abraham, Suknaski is a "cultural orphan," whose poetry demonstrates both a search for personal identity and "an attempt to define an identity for the cultural orphans who populate Canada's multicultural dimension."<sup>38</sup> From Suknaski's *The ghosts call you poor* where "Indian, Metis, Ukrainian, Chinese, homesteader, farmer, labourer move as spirits through his landscape, usually prairie"<sup>39</sup>; to his chronicle of Galician immigrants to the Prairies circa 1900 in *In the Name of Narid*; to *Silk Trail*, a collection of minimalist poems that takes as its central metaphor the trading route between China and the West, and incorporates historical and social comment on Chinese exploration and labour in Canada; to his much vaunted *Wood Mountain Poems*, thought by many to be the nexus of modern prairie poetics, the poet proves himself to be an extraordinary voice of the multicultural West. It is Suknaski's Wood Mountain, however, his ancestral roots, that move him to best mythologize his own and his parents' ethnicity and to celebrate "the memorable characters who peopled my boyhood memories and whose Sioux, Roumanian, English, Ukrainian or Serbian pride moved them to tell a well-remembered story."<sup>40</sup>

In Suknaski's art, as with Lysenko and Kurelek, ethnicity is conflated with prairie place and space. A sentient landscape and vast silent world is what the immigrant meets on the Prairies and this arrival and re-arrival is constantly played out in the mythology of prairie art. Referring to himself and Suknaski, the poet Eli Mandel, whose poetic cycle *Out of Place* is an icon for the complex and continuous theme of the self in relation to the environment in prairie poetics, sagely observes, "We write ourselves into existence."<sup>41</sup> In order to fulfil this immigrant desire of giving voice to being *here*, writers of the 1970s and 1980s, like Mandel and Robert Kroetsch claimed that art on the Prairies must necessarily take its first shape in the vernacular. Mandel explains, "In some ways poetry was not possible on the Prairies until the language was heard. The 'invented' poems got in the way. ... the 'vernacular' had to get into the poems, as it did with Suknaski..."<sup>42</sup> Dennis Cooley, too, identifies the colonizing effect of Euro-centred fine art forms on prairie poets:

A period of high modernism looked for a poetry that could never be written on the Prairies: it wanted a tight metaphysical poetry celebrating irony, paradox, ambiguity — a poetry that is essentially European in its allusiveness. So what do you do? If this is the kind of poetry you must write in order to be a poet. ... how do you write poetry out of the Prairie? I think you don't.<sup>43</sup>

Cooley goes on to say that Suknaski did.

Writing in 1984 in a review of *Montage for an Interstellar Cry*, Stephen Scobie describes Suknaski, with his anecdotal style, his portraits of prairie people and poetic historicizing as the "presiding shaman of prairie poetry" whose "influence has been the dominant factor in the West for the past decade."<sup>44</sup> As the Wood Mountain "folk" poet, and subject of an excellent National Film Board documentary in 1978, Suknaski

38 Michael Abraham, "Cultural Orphans and Wood Mountain: The Poetry of Andrew Suknaski," *Prairie Journal of Canadian Literature* 14 (1990): 24.

39 Lawrence Ricou, "Words and Wine," *Canadian Literature* 36 (Autumn 1980): 129.

40 Andrew Suknaski, *Wood Mountain Poems* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1976), 124.

41 Ann Munton, "The Structural Horizons of Prairie Poetics: The Long Poem, Eli Mandel, Andrew Suknaski, and Robert Kroetsch," *Dalhousie Review* (Spring 1983): 71.

42 *Ibid.*, 72.

43 *Ibid.*

44 Stephen Scobie, *The Malahat Review* 67 (February 1984): 141.

surfaces as an extraordinary vernacular artist. His exceptional talent rests partly on orality, on the re-creation of the sounds of ordinary people's voices, and the rhythms of their lives and thoughts expressed in speech. Suknaski is himself the ethnic poet as oral storyteller, threading together narrative vignettes, and inaugurating them as prairie myth, such as the following memorable anecdotal verse from "Jimmy Hoy's Place": "hoy's place was where in boyhood one came to know death / when men ceased joking / as someone arrived with the first news / of men like the jealous agent / from another town— / how he imagined a lover for his beautiful faithful wife / until / one day he left a note on the grain scales / saying: *i think it'll be better this way for all of us* / and then walked his .22 behind the elevator / to perform what some believe to be the most creative act / hoy's icecream and chinese calendar girls were / something to dream about / ...something to remember as one woke falling / against the twisted wheel of lovenzanna's tractor / george tonita bought at the auction sale following / the funeral..."<sup>45</sup>

As a poet of multicultural community, Suknaski is intuitively engaged in the folklorist's field of ethnopoetics. He is concerned with an authentic rendering of speech and dialect, and as close an approximation as possible to its heard orality. Like the anthropologist Dennis Tedlock, who in his study of the narrative poetry of the Zuni Indians determined that no orally presented speech should be transcribed in prose form and that people always speak in poetic lines, not sentences,<sup>46</sup> Suknaski re-creates the people of Wood Mountain and their stories as poetry. The poet also loves their dialects and their ethnic accents, which transliterated become expressions of character or, as in "Jimmy Hoy's Place," poetic refrain. The poet begins with Hoy's voice: "gee clyz / all time slem ting hoy would say / when he got mad at some obnoxious drunk / stirring hell in the cafe..." and he repeats Hoy's fractured refrain, "gee clyz / all time slem ting" as a poetic chorus and affectionate gesture to his character throughout the poem.

Ukrainian Canadian accents and speech patterns are also perfectly realized in a number of Suknaski poems. Ukrainian words and phrases, too, dot his poetry, and in *The Land They Gave Away*, the poet in his concern for making his people heard, includes a guide for his reader on Ukrainian pronunciation. In poem like "Alexander Czornucha," the character of this man, and the temper of his life is felt in the transcribed Ukrainian and vernacular of the poetry. This poem is a remarkable chronicle of a man who, "only God knows how ... / fully fluent in french latin german and four slavonic languages / world war one veteran / and once a professor somewhere / in the austro-hungarian empire / ever wound up as a manitoba farmer." The poem is introduced by a phonetically rendered quotation from andrew suknaski, sr: "ven rrahshuns movedhd to ukrraine / i tole myne brahderrs een carrpatch / 'all you got now / arre the songs you seeng'." These words of an ordinary man encapsulate, with feeling, a people's, and Czornucha's, history of oppression. Similarly, the solitary, displaced life of the immigrant Czornucha is authenticated through expressions that English readers themselves cannot understand: "the sad truth being that no one / no one ever understands a thing / beyond faint glimmerings / alexander's ukrainian pitted with polish russian and german / and only during saturday morning

45 Andrew Suknaski, *The Land They Gave Away* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1982), 28.

46 Pauline Greenhill, *Lots of Stories. Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies, Paper No. 57* (Ottawa: National Museum of Man), 5; Jerome Rothenberg, *Shaking the Pumpkin: Traditional Poetry of the Indian North Americas* (New York: Alfred van der Marck Editions, 1986), xxi.

wrestling on tv in the lobby / do they perfectly understand him / his curses narrating the action / "didko ... aby ioho shliak trafyv / ... kholera!"<sup>47</sup>

The patterns of prairie poetics include both love of first ancestors on the land and nostalgia for region,<sup>48</sup> what Suknaski calls *pamiat*—memory. In his elegiac work "The Prairie Graveyard," the poet declares, "I wanted to say something about all this remembering, remembering and 'I remember.' The prairie compulsion to honour the memory, what Eli Mandel calls the 'remembered place' or remembered home,"<sup>49</sup> is the immigrant fantasy, one that is replayed on the Prairies for the second-generation settler who dreams the gypsy leave-takings of the fore/fathers, perhaps even the nomadic ways of the Plains Indians before them, but hungers in memory for home. Documenting home/land, birth/place and humanity is the obsession of a prairie poet like Suknaski, who is poet-archeologist, compelled to unearth the layers of history buried in the prairie ground and chronicle the artifacts and ghosts of both settler and Native cultures. Thus Sitting Bull and Crowfoot ride out of Suknaski's poetry, alongside his characters of European ethnicities. In "Indian Site on the Edge of Tonita Pasture" from *The Land They Gave Away*, the poet lays claim to "this ancestral space to move through and beyond / stapled to the four cardinal directions / this is my right / to chronicle the meaning of these vast plains / in a geography of blood / and failure / making them live."<sup>50</sup> As a folk poet, Suknaski practices an all-inclusive multicultural poeticism, giving voice to the presence and stories of all the prairie's peoples.

Suknaski's *pamiat*, or memory, is equally important to Cree painter Allen Sapp (born 1928), who was born on the Red Pheasant Reserve south of North Battleford, Saskatchewan and who has gained a remarkable reputation as a painter-recorder of the reserve way of life. Sapp's photographic memory of his childhood in the 1930s and 1940s has inspired him to create emotive, narrative paintings of ordinary people, events and activities that are so full of feeling that writer W.P. Kinsella insists that "there are stories of viewers being moved to tears by the art of Allen Sapp."<sup>51</sup> The resonating beauty of Sapp's canvases is based in part on a tone of idyllic calm and the comfort of human companionship that many of his paintings suggest. Native community, indeed, universal human community, emanates from works of art that most often feature artistically arranged clumps of people working and playing together in concert.

Like Lysenko, Kurelek and Suknaski, Sapp's forefathers and foremothers, too, were immigrants to the Prairies and he clearly sees himself, like these other prairie visionaries, as an artist-chronicler of his displaced people and their folkways. The Cree were originally a nomadic woodlands people who expanded westward with the fur trade into northern woodlands areas of the Prairies. Some of them later became buffalo-hunting people known as the Plains Cree. They were ultimately persuaded to accept reserve lands in lieu of "their rights to exclusive domicile on the prairies" and Chief Red Pheasant chose to locate his reserve in a region with some parkland bush

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47 Suknaski, *The Land They Gave Away*, 53.

48 Munton, "The Structural Horizons of Prairie Poetics," 73.

49 Andrew Suknaski, "The Prairie Graveyard," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 18/19 (Summer/Fall 1980): 116.

50 Suknaski, *The Land They Gave Away*, 39.

51 William Kinsella, *Two Spirits Soar: The Art of Allen Sapp* (Toronto: Stoddard, 1990), 1.



Allen Sapp, *Cooling Rabbit on a Stick* (courtesy of Masters Gallery, Calgary, and Allen Sapp).

and gently rolling hills.<sup>52</sup> It is this Saskatchewan settlement that Sapp memorializes in starkly representational and beautifully lighted images with such titles (translated into English) as “Taking Horses Into The Barn,” “Making a Crazy Quilt,” “Cooking Rabbit On A Stick,” “Pow-Wow Dancers,” “Teaching Li'l Kids,” “The Sun Dance,” “Passing Around The Tea.”

Discussing Sapp's art within the traditions of the art academy, including within the definitions of folk art or naive art, is not entirely satisfactory. Firstly, in the United States, folk art definition is rarely applied to Native American art (outside the category of primitive). Art critic Lucy Lippard explains: “Curiously, one rarely sees ‘Native American folk art’ — or rather, one sees it but not under the rubric. Ironically, some Native American art represents one area where the boundaries between folk and fine art are crossed... .”<sup>53</sup> Secondly, as we shall see, although Sapp in some ways fits the classic definition of the naive artist, his paintings have an authority and capacity to move the viewer that goes beyond what most naive artists are able to create.

The naive folk artist paints by instinct, in a self-assured way, and is little concerned with art instruction or critical responses to his/her art. As Sapp puts it, “painting is a feeling, just like Indian music is a feeling” although he acknowledges that he must also put mental effort into his work.<sup>54</sup> Blake McKendry explains that the naive artist

52 John Warner and Theda Bradshaw, *A Cree Life: The Art of Allen Sapp* (Vancouver: J.J. Douglas Ltd., 1977), 12.

53 Lucy Lippard, “Crossing Into Uncommon Ground,” in Hall and Metcalfe, eds., *The Artist Outsider*, 16.

54 Thelma Holmgren, “Book Review of *A Cree Life*,” *Journal of the West* 22, no. 2 (April 1982): 110.

"appeals to our fondest memories of childhood.... He or she recalls long-forgotten happiness and prompts us to resume a child-like gaze at the world." Furthermore, the naive artist is above all committed to a personal vision, one that provides pleasure for himself and pleasure for the viewer.<sup>55</sup> Allen Sapp illustrates a characteristic naive vision with his remarks, "I paint because I like to paint not because people pay money for my work. Money, we need it but it is people who are more important," and "I paint picture of old sleigh. Just like I remember, long time before government houses come. I was little then, little boy. I watched all the time. That's the way I paint."<sup>56</sup>

Although Sapp's attitude to art is clearly that of the naive artist, he is an extraordinary mood painter, an equal to tutored painters of the art academy like the American Edward Hopper, in his capacity to instill feeling. His painting also demonstrates some technical sophistication, and for one critic, exemplifies the palette of northern painters, as expressed in early Sapp paintings of brown, blue and white, flecked with colour.<sup>57</sup> He is also not typical of the naive painter in that he shows some concern for formal characteristics of academic art, taught to him by a mentor, artist Winona Mulcaster, who "conveyed to him some of the subtleties of placement, perspective, technique, light, shade, space and related objects." In later more colourful works like *A Big Pow-Wow*, Sapp has also become more commanding in his formulation of design. Colour and pattern, sometimes repeated, as in the painting *The Sun Dance* (where line and circle converge in well defined rows of Native people, some in circles, facing the sun dance pole, itself circling the Natives) often move the viewer beyond illustration to a feeling of the power of Native community. In *The Sun Dance*, too, the central image of the painting, the sun dance pole, dominates the painting as symbol, in the manner of a formal device of the academic painter.<sup>58</sup>

If Vera Lysenko, William Kurelek and Andrew Suknaski began with fine arts educations and adopted ethnicity and folk art as subject and style, Allen Sapp began as an untutored folk artist of the Plains Cree and developed fine arts sensibilities through intuition, creative genius and the inherited attitudes of Native culture, such as a powerful feeling for nature. Sapp is certainly one Canadian artist who has crossed the boundary between folk and fine art. In summary, all four artists under discussion are remarkable vernacular artists and important contributors to the mythology of the prairie West which, projected in a panoply of artistic dreams and visions, includes those well-charted longings for home/land and utopian and pastoral possibilities in a new world, a garden place. In this tradition, all of these artists romance the Prairies, its people — their people — with the enthusiasm of the positive side of the prairie double, that *doppelgänger* who has haunted the mindscapes of poets like Suknaski, Eli Mandel and Robert Kroetsch. The "other side" of ethnicity on the Prairies — the dark *doppelgänger* — could well be interpreted as the patriarchal brutality and limited opportunities of peasant life; this is touched on, but lightly, by Lysenko in *Yellow Boots*, and largely submerged by Kurelek and Suknaski in the love-hate affirmations in their art of their brutalizing but caring fathers.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, Allen Sapp chooses to "avoid the ugly reality of Native life,"<sup>60</sup> preferring to see with the eyes of Manitou where "his

55 McKendry, *Folk Art*, 57-58.

56 Warner and Bradshaw, *A Cree Life*, 24.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid., 21.

59 Munton, "The Structural Horizons of Prairie Poetics," 83.

60 Don Murray, "Book Review of *Two Spirits Soar: The Art of Allen Sapp*," *Prairie Forum* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 129.

people and the environment are one, linked through the spirit of nature."<sup>61</sup> In Sapp's painting, *Hauling Hay*, which is not unlike Kurelek's work in image and sentience, two men sit doubled, one a close copy of the other, in a load of hay. Here is the original, rural prairie *doppelgänger* at rest. Symbolic of the art of all four artists, he is captured momentarily in a fleeting vision of benign folk life, wholeness and close community.

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61 Max Macdonald, "Chronicler of the Cree," *Canadian Geographic* (August/September 1990): 40.