

In Memory of Gail Guthrie Valaskakis 1939–2007: A Personal View

Gail and I had our first conversation during the Christmas break of 1974. When I found out I was going to be on Baffin Island for a few months, a mutual friend suggested I call a certain professor by the name of Gail Valaskakis to find out what clothing to bring. When this phone conversation lasted for three hours, I knew I had been talking to someone very special. A few months later, I was sitting in the Frobisher Inn coffee shop with friends when I heard this unforgettable voice and Gail's treasured laughter. I got up, went to the source of the voice, leaned in, and said: "You're Gail Valaskakis." "Yup, and you're Lorna Roth," she responded. We laughed and hugged and that was the beginning of our wonderful friendship of 32 years.

When I think of Gail, this is what I think of: an arm in the sky, a foot in the mud; a moccasin on one foot, a low-heeled shoe on the other; a person who trusted others implicitly and sometimes naïvely; a person with integrity; an inspiring teacher and mentor for graduate students and young colleagues; the sensitive mother of fraternal twins, Paris and Ion; a devoted partner and family member; her powerful relationship to her grandmother, her father, and to her interior memory-archive of Lac du Flambeau history and artifacts that so passionately drove her work. I imagine Lac du Flambeau, Wisconsin, where she was born and raised and became Indian-identified. I also think of her beautiful turquoise and silver Native jewelry, her catchy smile and laughter, clothing without a single wrinkle, and the fact that she was an impeccable dresser; her twin identities of being a blonde, blue-eyed Indian; her eloquence, elegance, clarity of expression; what it means to "be a lady"; her commitment to social justice, equity, communication, and cultural rights; her diplomacy aesthetic; her sitting at her home computer thick in the process of writing with a pile of books and papers scattered around her.

I remember her phobia of crossing bridges (a particularly potent security issue—given what has recently happened in Minneapolis) and the strange route she *created* to get herself to the Loyola campus to avoid traffic; her love of garage sales, flea markets, and the collection of Native objects and Indian princess images, which resulted from her weekly excursions to these over many years¹; her inability to say no to anyone who asked her to do special projects even though she was already overworked. I think of an Indian princess as exemplified in a photo of herself in full stereotypical outfit in her home office—looking much like the Brooke Shields images she spent years collecting and then exhibiting with Mare Burgess' collection of cowgirls; another photo, too: one of Bo Platon, her

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first father-in-law, who was an international lawyer in Egypt and whose office was the epitome of several paper castles side by side—whenever she felt frustrated that she had too many papers and couldn't find anything beneath the first inch, she would look at this photo and laugh and realize that her mess was nothing in comparison.

Gail was a warm and loved person, someone who thoroughly cherished stimulating conversation and who was a great storyteller. Her most eloquent discourses (oral and written) were story and experience-based. Here is one of her favourite stories that she used as a metaphor for better understanding human relations of the cross-cultural kind. It was adapted from a story about multiple perspectives told by Maggie Hodgson (1990), former director of the Nechi Institute in Edmonton:

There was once “a wolf, a trickster who ignores a promise on his journey through life and loses his sight. Hungry and blind, he comes upon a mouse in his travels. He pleads with the mouse for his eyes, and the mouse finally agrees to give him one eye. The wolf thanks him and continues on his way. But with his small mouse eye, he can only see one tiny bit of reality at a time, one person, one drum, one rock. Then he bumps into a buffalo. He pleads with the buffalo for his eyes, and the buffalo finally agrees to give him one eye. The wolf thanks him and continues on his way. With his big buffalo eye, the wolf can see the complex alliances of families, communities, and nations in which he lives. And so the wolf proceeds on his journey through life, now able to see with both his mouse eye and his buffalo eye; his sight reveals interrelated realities: individual and collective, past and present, Indian and Other.” (Valaskakis, 2005, p. 7)

It is through two distinct eyes, such as those of the mouse and the buffalo, that Gail probed the experience of being Native-identified in North America in most of her research and writing.

We were very young when we began to live the ambivalence of our reality. My marbleplaying, bicycle riding, king-of-the-royal-mountain days were etched with the presence of unexplained identity and power. I knew as I sat in the cramped desks of the Indian school that wigwams could shake with the rhythm of a Midéwiwin ceremonial drum, fireballs could spring from the whispers of a windless night, and Bert Skye, the son of the medicine man Anawabe, could (without warning) transform himself into a dog. I knew that my great-grandmother moved past the Catholic altar in her house with her hair dish in her hand to place graying combings of her hair in the first fire of the day, securing them from evil spirits. And I knew that I was yoked to these people through the silence of ancient actions and the kinship of the secret. Later I realized that we were equally and irrevocably harnessed to one another and to this Wisconsin reservation land through indigence, violence, and ulcerated exclusion, recoiling among outsiders and ourselves; and that I was both an Indian and an outsider. (Valaskakis, 2005, pp. 10-11)

Gail's sense of humour and her lived complex identity carried her through cross-cultural experiences that might have intimidated many of her colleagues. When faced with conflict, Gail would assess how to carefully mediate her way through the maze of the unknown and get out on the other side with grace and dignity. In her doctoral and other Northern communications research, Gail's method of engaging community participation and support in the research and evaluation process taught her how important community collaboration and control can be. As so well noted in the tribute of Lyndsay Green, a Northern colleague, so much of what Gail explored methodologically in the eighties has become universally adopted by current generations of community-based researchers. It is considered the norm now—so embedded in communication research approaches that few even remember Gail's role in pioneering these methods of collaborative research, evaluation, and policy development.

Gail was the first scholar to bring Aboriginal issues to cultural studies in North America (1988, 1989, 1993), and she led the way to a range of new and important openings in the field. As noted by Lawrence Grossberg about her book *Indian Country*,

There are books you wait for, patiently, because you know that when they finally arrive, your patience will be rewarded. . . . These essays are a joy to read, filled with insights not only on Native culture, experience, and politics but also on the value and practice of Cultural Studies. *Indian Country*. . . is quite simply, one of the best books on questions of culture, identity, and belonging that I have read in a long time. (Valaskakis, 2005, back cover)

Gail was not just a scholar and educator. She was also an activist and an educational administrator. As an activist, she had a heart of gold, an intuitive sense of fairness in policies and practices, and an understanding of the logistics of economic administration. Much of her spare time was spent doing volunteer work and providing service to various constituency groups in the broader community, for which she became widely known. Gail was a founding member of the first postsecondary institution in eastern Canada designed specifically for Aboriginal students, Manitou College. She also helped create the Native Friendship Centre of Montréal and used her skills to establish Waseskun House, a halfway house north of Montréal that has grown into a full-fledged Healing Lodge for men in trouble with the law. She had her turn as president of the Canadian Communications Association as well.

Her administrative appointments at Concordia included chair of the Department of Communication Studies (1983-85), vice-dean, Faculty of Arts and Science (1985-90), then dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science (1992-97). While at Concordia, she introduced innovative curricula such as courses on Intercultural Communications, Media and Cultural Context, and Communications in the Canadian North to the Communication Studies department. After she began holding more senior positions, she helped establish the Inter-University Joint Doctoral Programme in Communications with the Université du Québec à Montréal and the Université de Montréal. At Concordia University, she established the Native Education Centre and became known for encouraging recruitment methods to

extend to Native communities. Gail consistently supported Native, multicultural, and multiracial initiatives at the university. Her place within the administration ensured that inclusiveness and equity would be consistently raised in policy and practice deliberations at the upper levels of management.

After retiring from Concordia in 1998, Gail spent two years intensely focused on the completion of her book of essays, *Indian Country: Essays on Contemporary Native Culture* (2005). When she was satisfied with the manuscript, she accepted an offer to work within the non-profit sector as research director of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, where she supervised hundreds of studies across the country and brought to the organization the immense asset of her range of knowledge and experience. She had a great impact on the Canadian health and social welfare communities, and her vision of equity, fairness, and social justice has contributed to the development of new federal bureaucratic practices, decisions, and policies, without doubt.

Gail won a National Aboriginal Achievement Award in 2002 and was given an honorary doctorate by the University of Ottawa in 2005.

Besides her trust and integrity, Gail's most memorable personal characteristics were her mediation skills and her persistence *to continue on* no matter what the obstacles were. Her being "of two cultures" taught her to have empathy for both, as she delivered messages from one side to the other as a cultural mediator. It is very interesting that she carefully reflected on and wrote about the Inuit "go-between" in her early historical research for her dissertation, which she completed at McGill University in 1979. "The whalers initiated the concept of 'contact agent'—Inuit delegated by Euro-Canadians to act as community go-betweens, direct native activity to suit the needs of agency—maintained in this role through Euro-Canadian authority and technology" (Valaskakis, 1981, p. 212).

In some ways, her own career involved a similar back and forth-ness between communities, organizations, and governments. She always worked with minorities of one sort or another and captured descriptions of their realities to share with others who needed that information for policy/decision-making or for ethnographic knowledge. She collected cultural and social evidence to be used in arguments for resources, institutional support, and better self-governance opportunities. Because of her incredible intellectual and cultural persistence, and her generosity, she became very successful at helping others empower themselves. You need only glance at her curriculum vitae to realize her skill and savvy at doing this. She knew the power of documentation, strategic rhetoric, persistence, and diplomacy, and she used all of these with finesse, and while she did this, she showed herself to be one fine and memorable lady. Fo Niemi (executive director of the Centre for Research/Action on Race Relations, on whose board of directors Gail sat for a number of years) reminded me recently of her participation at the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission as an intervener in support of the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network. After her intervention speech, the entire audience broke into applause. A rare moment indeed and an attestation to her impressive eloquence.

In her final months and then days, her persistence manifested itself in a more personal way. She insisted that the few of us who knew about her illness keep it

confidential. She did not want to be the subject of gossip; she wanted to retain her dignity and to keep working in a normal environment for as long as she could. And this she did. Gail worked until she could no longer sit at her computer and guide her fingers over the keys; she moved about without a walker or wheelchair until she could no longer maintain her vertical balance; she talked with energy and insight until the morphine took over her central nervous system and slowed down her voice, her articulation, and her expressive abilities; Gail breathed without an oxygen apparatus until she could do so no longer.

I intuitively knew she would pass away when she returned from Lac du Flambeau this summer. I suspect she and her family did as well. Nonetheless, she insisted on going for one last time to the “home of her heart”—against her doctors’ advice. (There’s that persistence again.) And when her body told her that it was time to return to Ottawa, where she had been getting medical treatment, she was ready. She passed away a few days after her return.

Gail used to love telling this story that she heard from Duke Redbird “about a non-Indian who is driving through a maze of unmarked reservation roads, searching for the road to the Duck Lake pow wow. He sees an old Indian piling wood. He rolls down his car window and calls out, ‘Where’s the road to Duck Lake pow wow?’ Without looking up, the old man answers, ‘Don’t know.’ The man in the car rolls up his window, muttering, ‘Dumb Indian.’ The old man looks at the stranger and says, ‘I might be dumb, but I’m not lost’ ” (Valaskakis, 2005, p. 1).

Gail never lost her way as she travelled throughout this world and she will not lose her way in the spirit world. Nor will we (her family, friends, and colleagues) who remain behind ever lose sight of the intellectual and social routes, processes, and institutions she established and co-founded as a pioneer. Her accomplishments, her institutional and intellectual legacies across North America, will always be embedded with her inspiring mark of excellence.

Gail died from the complications of lung cancer on July 19, 2007, at 7:50 p.m.

Note

1. As an aside, the executive director of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, Mike Degagné, made a rather humorous, but insightful, comment in his tribute speech to Gail at the memorial service on July 27. He noted: “The economy of Nunavut will suffer from Gail’s passing,” referring to her Inuit art and jewellery collecting patterns.

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