

Dilemmas of Definition

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When Joni Mitchell wailed "Oh Canada" back in 1971, the word evoked landscapes both emotional and geographic, wide and wild. In a series of quavering notes, she imbued those three syllables with homesickness and loss. Yet Canada remains forever neutral, even undifferentiated, to most U.S. minds. It's a hard place to feel specific about, except to note that some native speakers unfurl beautifully attenuated O's and moody girl singers grow on trees up there (Dieckman, 1994, 32).

In the introduction to their book Mondo Canuck, Geoff Pevere and Greig Dymond suggest that, as "far as we know, no Canadians have yet died from a lack of cultural identity . . ." (Pevere and Dymond, 1996, ii). We might challenge this claim, of course, noting that a weakened sense of cultural identity sometimes produces social and personal crises whose consequences, in aboriginal communities and elsewhere, may be devastating. Most Anglophone Canadians, nonetheless, regard the question of Canadian cultural identity as one which is of little urgency but irritatingly persistent. Few of us will die from a lack of cultural identity, but this does not absolve us of ongoing anxieties over the legitimacy of our own tastes and cultural habits; it does not diminish the federal government's conviction that its own legitimacy depends on the strength of a certain kind of Canadian culture. And, perhaps most importantly, the non-urgency of the cultural question in Canada does not remove the sense of "ethical incompleteness" (Miller, 1993, xi) which makes most of us wish, much of the time, that we were

a little more interested in the films, novels, paintings and other products of an English-Canadian culture.

I have endeavored, in these few pages, to wind my way through some loosely connected themes borrowed or developed over several years of teaching courses on Canadian culture to undergraduate students. All of those courses were taught in English, at English-language universities, and this essay is mostly about “English-Canadian culture”, with all the messy imperfection which that term cannot shed. Indeed, the English language has no more status here than as one of those languages of convergence of which Charles Taylor (1997) has written; it is a language which links citizens and immigrants, who may speak other languages at home and with their friends, to pre-existing Canadian cultural institutions and complexes of interlocking cultural phenomena.

Economic and ethical accounts of cultural weakness

Over the years in which I have taught courses on Canadian culture, the average level of commitment by students to the ideal of a strong and distinct English-Canadian culture has remained surprisingly high. This commitment has gone hand in hand with the conviction that English-Canadian culture is weak, though specific explanations of this weakness have come in and out of fashion. A few years ago, students readily accepted the argument that structural conditions had produced and perpetuated this weakness. These structural conditions included the domination of our culture industries by companies based, for the most part, in the U.S., and the complicity of our own governments in maintaining that domination. With time, I have noticed, the appeal of an analysis framed in geo-political, economic or structural terms has declined. Instead, students seem more and more willing to pose the problem in ethical,

individualistic terms. If English Canadian culture is weak, a new consensus seems to suggest, this is because we lack, as individuals, the moral strength which might compel us to seek out that culture's products and support them. Instead, we yield too readily to the temptations offered by those cultural phenomena which come from somewhere else.

There are, perhaps, valid historical reasons for this shift. English Canadian culture no longer seems to be characterized by conditions of scarcity, conditions which once could be easily blamed on the production and distribution structures of multinational capitalism. It is no longer the unavailability of Canadian cultural artefacts which perturbs us, some might suggest, but their inescapable omnipresence, and the unfulfilled duties of which they now remind us. We may now buy Canadian fiction or musical recordings in chain superstores; the films of Atom Egoyan or the National Film Board are easily found on videocassette; and a dozen specialty tv channels now recycle several years' worth of Canadian television drama. While we continue, much of the time, to resist these phenomena, we now blame this avoidance on our own failings, for which we feel guilty. We are less likely to see this avoidance as the effect of lingering structural conditions which conspire to keep English Canadian cultural artefacts marginal.

If students increasingly diagnose the weaknesses of our culture in ethical terms, academic writing on cultural policy has likewise come to place greater emphasis on the ethical dimensions of cultural consumption. The first wave of histories and analyses of cultural policy in Canada tended to regard the government's own claims about the need for a strong national culture as simply platitudinous, if not fraudulent. The true function of cultural policy, scholars suggested, was to protect the dominant interests in a particular industry, or to produce the ideological gloss which rendered palatable the Canadian government's complicity in our economic subservience to the U.S. (e.g., Raboy, 1990). Governments might summon us, as citizens and ethical subjects, to support a national culture, but scholars asked to recognize that they were doing so in bad

faith, masking the sell-out of our cultural sovereignty which economic policies and a failure of political will had made possible.

Recent scholarship has been more willing to take seriously the notion that the need of governments to intervene in the cultural field is genuine, rendered so by the imperative to shape the sorts of citizens which a state requires in order to perpetuate its legitimacy. In an influential book on cultural citizenship, Toby Miller has argued that states devise cultural policies, not simply to mediate between competing economic interests, but

to produce a sense of oneness among increasingly heterogeneous populations at a time when political systems are under question by new social movements and the internationalization of cultures and economies" (Miller 1993: xii).

Writing more specifically of Quebec, Allor and Gagnon suggest that the cultural field emerged, since the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s, as the principal realm through which the Quebec government seeks to legitimize itself (1994, 25-26). New thinking about the function of public cultural policy is less and less likely to emphasize the ways in which that policy might be subservient to the imperatives of multinational capitalism. Rather, it stresses the dilemma of governments whose legitimation is threatened by that capitalism, and their need to form citizens with an ethical commitment to national cultural development. Culture offers the most effective realm for linking citizen to state and ensuring the legitimacy of the state. The military and economic realms have either lost their mobilizing power or become immune to direct public intervention.

Ambivalence and Anxiety: The English-Canadian Cultural Consumer

For a long time, English-Canadians have allowed themselves the conceit that their involvement in U.S. popular culture is multi-layered. We are able, we believe, to move freely between the pleasures of participation, for which our profound understanding of U.S. popular culture has trained us, and the self-satisfaction of those who need not feel complicit with that culture. This ambivalence is often taken as proof that we are skilled negotiators of cultural resistance, possessed of the insider's intimate understanding of the culture which dominates us and the colonized subject's talent for subversive mimicry. The double registers which mark our relationship to U.S. popular culture are seen to shape both our habits of consumption and many of the cultural practices in which English Canadians seem to have excelled. (One of the most convincing uses of these ideas may be found in attempts to explain the character and success of English-Canadian sketch comedy (e.g., Pevere and Dymond, 1996).

There is much that rings true in this account, but our ambivalence may take other, less noble forms. In the field of popular music (the focus of much of my own research), English-Canadians are often torn between a smug sense of superiority, to those excesses (of emotion or belief) which we observe elsewhere, and an ongoing anxiety over the sense that we have no important or heroic role to play. Canada is one of those mid-sized countries, like Australia, which, while developed and prosperous, nevertheless devote most of their cultural life to artefacts which they do not produce. That somewhere else is usually the United States, of course, and, in the case of popular music, the United Kingdom. At no point has a specifically or

exclusively Canadian subculture figured in the histories of youth culture or popular music; in no instance with which I am familiar has a distinctly Canadian subcultural movement been copied or adapted elsewhere in the world.

This does not mean that we have no subcultures, of course, or that the energies which have presided over the formation of subcultures elsewhere have not found expression in Canada.

This situation invites us, nonetheless, to examine the ways in which countries like Canada receive and assimilate avowedly oppositional and transgressive cultural artefacts whose origins are elsewhere. Because none of the genres which have marked postwar popular music in important ways are distinctly Canadian, almost all the musics we consume will be within forms whose historically privileged or more apparently pure moments transpired elsewhere -- from rock and roll through punk and hip-hop . This has shaped the status of the political within Canadian musical culture, as it has in dozens of other countries around the world. Artefacts for which socio-political claims may be made, whether these be gansta rap records or drum-and-bass tracks, enter Canada within an economy of scarcity and legitimacy whose principal effect is to render them cherished and precious. We admire these musics as much for the marks of exotic origin they bear as for the vital energies they are seen to express, and the channels through which they enter our national cultural space are, typically, connoisseurist and cosmopolitan in character. Speed garage dance singles from the UK -- to invoke a recent example -- are brought to Canada by individuals intimately connected to the circulation of information on an international level; they presume cultural capital of the most basic kind, such as that which tells you where to find British music magazines in Montreal or Regina, or what an imported record is and where to find it. The principle audiences for these artefacts, within Canada, show an interest in the already-authenticated and the scarce. The often urgent social and political

contexts of origin of these artefacts mark them in ways which serve to authenticate them, but these contexts have little controlling influence on the uses to which these artefacts are put in Canada or the meanings which come to circulate around them.

This is, of course, an obvious point. It's long been claimed that reggae, punk or trip-hop, for example, come to Canada only to be picked up by those ignorant of the circumstances in which they took shape, of the social energies and conflictual circumstances which presided over their emergence. This is one of the ways in which the legitimacy of our own versions of these subcultures is undermined. What is less often considered is the economy of objects and artefacts which structures the cultural sphere in a country like Canada, the role of scarcity and economic marginalization in producing a social cartography of tastes. Dance music culture in Canada, for example, is shaped by infrastructures which operate at two extremes: between the connoisseurist culture of imported 12" vinyl singles sold only in independent record stores, at one end, and the market for domestically-pressed CD compilations of cheesy Euro-house dance music at the other. There are few of the mediating institutions and little of the commodity production which would sustain fine gradations of taste and connoisseurship between these two extremes. There are virtually no locally pressed vinyl 12" singles anymore, no dance singles to be found in major record stores at reasonable prices, a weak market generally for CD singles. This gulf exaggerates the fetishistically connoisseurist character of imported, underground dance music just as it nourishes the perception of the rest (i.e., those CDS produced in Canada) as abject and degraded.

One effect of this situation is that commodities which, in the context of their origin, bear the marks of oppositionality or authenticity, are most readily brought into Canada by those with the skills and cosmopolitan connections to recognize the marks of connoisseurist value. Few dispositions in a country like Canada are more adaptable than those which hover at the borders

and focus on imported records or other artefacts of avowedly oppositional cultures: these dispositions (and the credibility of the individuals who deploy them) can survive the transitions from punk to synth-pop to house to rave to electronica and on through recent revivals of easy listening music and swing. Because most subcultural forms enter Canada through the gateway of connoisseurship, a taste for them has tended to cluster within the middle class, reinforcing longstanding associations between cosmopolitan bohemianism and a taste for the transgressive and genuine. The energies and social forces which have fuelled the emergence of certain kinds of music (or painting or cinema) are generally displaced, as these things enter Canada, by an over-valuing of their status as genuine, as cherished products of those places where the truly heroic moments in popular cultural history unfold.

What this means, of course, is that the field of popular music in Canada is, much of the time, marked by a high level of anxiety and status panic. Our decisions to lend belief to certain kinds of music are mixed up with our uncertainty over whether we have accurately diagnosed their place within hierarchies of legitimacy which take shape somewhere else. As emotional, affective responses, anxiety and status panic are much less heroic than the sorts of subversive, resistant forms of consumption which subcultural theory (or cultural studies more generally) has claimed to uncover. They are, nevertheless, at the core of what it means to engage in cultural life in a country which lies just beyond the centres of cultural power.

English-Canada's place within the international flow of cultural objects and influences has left us well-equipped to contribute to broader, contemporary debates over globalization. Themes which are prominent in recent globalization theory -- the unrooting of cultural artefacts from their places of origin, the fetishizing of local origins as the basis of cultural value, the commodification of nature within a global tourist economy, and so on -- have long been addressed by Canadian scholars, critics and cultural activists. Cultural practices within

English-Canada unfold with a keen awareness of their place within international systems of cultural value; each grapples with the question of whether its origins are to be disguised or trumpeted.

Measuring Cultural Distinctiveness: The Dilemmas of Definition

In 1985, the Federal Task Force on Broadcasting Policy (or “Kaplan-Sauvageau Commission”), like government commissions before and since, addressed the problem of Canadian television and its relationship to a national culture. In particular, the Task Force confronted the complaint that much of the dramatic programming on Canadian television -- programming made with public subsidies or used to meet Canadian Content requirements -- did not seem Canadian in any obvious sense. Programs were certified as “Canadian” according to the origins of the individuals and firms involved in their production, but such criteria did little to deter producers from making programs blatantly imitative of American models, or from disguising Canadian locales to suggest that they were in the U.S.

A research study conducted for the Task Force (by myself and two colleagues; Bruck, Straw and O’Sullivan, 1985) took up the question of how one might judge the “Canadianness” of television programs. The challenge was to devise a means for evaluating this which which would possess conceptual rigour and lend itself to practical application within government cultural policy. One might, for example, evaluate programs based on the extent to which they included cultural markers of “Canadianess”: recognizable locales, key signifiers of national location (such as license plates or flags), rituals (such as curling matches) and so on. A system of rewards for the use of these markers might counter-act the widely-noted tendency of producers to disguise their fictional worlds in order to pass off Canadian films or television programs as American. Nevertheless, while one could imagine complicated systems for

allocating points based on the presence of such markers, this would obviously trivialize the issue.

It would reduce national cultural expression to a catalogue of tokens of Canadianness, many of them blatantly stereotypical.

Other possible criteria for evaluating “Canadianness” possessed more intellectual substance, but were no more appealing as possible elements of a cultural policy. While there is a widespread belief that Canadian films and television programs offer a distinct (i.e., more restrained) tone than those imported from the U.S., insistence on a “Canadian tone” as a requirement for certain kinds of public support seems both ludicrous and unnecessarily authoritarian. (The parallel example often invoked here is that of Australian film policy, which, it is claimed, gives additional support to films which manifest an Australian “look.”) More to the point, a valorization of “tone” risks enshrining, as the expression of a national cultural sensibility, an aspect of Canadian films or tv programs which might simply be an effect of their lower budgets and production values.

The Federal Task Force on Broadcasting Policy undertook its work after at least two decades in which critical discourse on film, literature, television, music and painting had offered influential arguments about the thematic consistency of English-language and French-language Canadian culture. The relationship of this work to cultural policy, however, has always been uneasy. Cultural policy within Canada has not, as in many other countries, been founded primarily on an abstract enterprise of democratization or geared towards the moral improvement of the citizenry. Rather, it has rested on claims about the distinctiveness of our culture and the importance of that distinctiveness as a basis for building or maintaining national cohesion. As a result, cultural policy has been compelled to flirt with the project of defining a national cultural character, even as it has bumped up against the obvious risks in doing so. As the very least, this

has resulted in some conceptual slippages, such as those which occur when the characteristics of public broadcasting (similar as they often are across a number of different countries) are taken as the expression of a genuinely Canadian character.

The impulse to define national cultural traditions within English Canada was strongest from the late 1960s through the early 1980s, when it fueled the effort to strengthen the place of English-Canadian culture within university curricula in the humanities. The critical position which dominated during this period is one which, somewhat reluctantly (since the term has become so explosively provocative in contemporary cultural theory), I will call the “essentialist” position. This position presumes that there are thematic traits common to works of Canadian culture, and that it is the job of the critic to find these amidst the variations of surface detail which might make such works seem unrelated. Perhaps the best-known of these critical claims was Margaret Atwood's argument that the essence of the Canadian character could be found in the simple drive to survive, a drive which provided the thematic substance of Canadian literature in both English and French (Atwood, 1972). This preoccupation with survival was evident in the number of literary characters who were victims; it could be seen in the preoccupation of Canadian authors with landscape and the general hardship of life.

Other versions of this argument took shape across the humanities. In his influential book Movies and Mythologies, Peter Harcourt (1977) found a thematic unity for English-Canadian cinema in a crisis of character motivation. Looking at the scattered feature film tradition of the 1960s and early 1970s, he noted that the ‘heroes’ of Canadian films were typically trapped in a real or emotional adolescence. Later, Geoff Pevere would write of the ‘stubbornly worrisome’ character of English-Canadian films, regarding this as the appropriate response of one national culture to a powerful neighbour whose own films were marked by the constant exhortation to be happy (Pevere, 1992). In the field of popular music, it was argued

that the essence of a Canadian style was to be found in its interweaving of rural and urban influences, in an open sound of the sort found first in the folk revival of the late 1960s (Neil Young, Gordon Lightfoot) and, subsequently, in the open, expansive rock music of Blue Rodeo or the Tragically Hip (see, for example, Brown, 1991). Writing on Canadian television, Morris Wolfe argued that the essence of Canadian television was its slower, more restrained pace, its reliance on a lower number of “jolts per minute” than was typical of U.S. television (Wolfe, 1985). In her analysis of the visual arts in Canada, Gaile McGregor claimed that Canadian artistic practice was marked by a preoccupation with landscape, by an ambivalence towards nature which wrestled with both its beauty and its terror (McGregor, 1985).

Those engaged in mapping the thematic preoccupations of English-Canadian culture rarely did so in an explicitly prescriptive sense, as if these inventories of thematic concerns were to be used forever after to judge between the genuinely and the falsely Canadian. Like any attempt to define a national tradition, however, they invited us to see certain works as more central or peripheral than others within the emergence of a coherent, national culture. The dangers inherent in an essentialist approach should be obvious, and need not all be rehearsed here. With time, the claim that Canadian fiction was principally about survival, or that its music was essentially a synthesis of rural and urban traditions, ran up against new waves of writing from immigrants to Canadian cities like Vancouver, or the recognition accorded rap production teams from Toronto or Halifax. Essentialist critical positions have figured as implicit influences on cultural policy -- shaping ideas about what constitutes artistic value in the Canadian cinema, or about the appropriate formats for creative collaboration in popular music -- but they can no longer figure unproblematically within public statements of government policy.

A second position in the debate over a Canadian culture is what I would call the compensatory position. This argues that Canadian culture possesses no distinctive essence, or

that, at the very least, it is not the purpose of public policy to discover an essence and devise the means by which that essence should flower. Rather, the argument goes, Canadian culture typically compensates for those gaps which the cultural products of the U.S., Great Britain and France have left open. At one level, Canadian culture moves to fill these gaps in a strictly strategic sense, through the identification of open and under served markets. Less obviously, Canadian culture will fill these gaps as a result of the more informal and unconscious processes by which those undertaking creative careers in Canada adapt to the possibilities available to them. The character of English-Canadian cultural artefacts, then, is not expressive of a deeply-rooted, distinctive sensibility. Rather, it is produced in the ongoing effort to find distinctive means of producing and marketing cultural goods in an environment dominated by players and products whose origins are elsewhere.

If we have specialized in certain kinds of literature, or film, or television, this position suggests, it is because other sorts of cultural commodities with wide appeal are produced more successfully by the cultural industries of the U.S. and other countries. Seeing no point in competing with these industries directly, we have gone after the internationally dispersed markets for cultural goods which bear the mark of a certain quality -- typically, goods which manifest a gentility and restraint of the sort treasured by cosmopolitan, connoisseurist audiences.

Thus, if the best-known Canadian filmmakers make low-budget, somewhat arty films about loser figures this is not (or not merely) because they are expressing essential qualities of the Canadian character. Rather, it is because loser figures are part of the dramatic vocabulary of the international art cinema, one way in which that cinema distinguishes itself from Hollywood blockbusters. Our television programs are not as flashy as those made in the U.S. because we depend, increasingly, on sales to overseas markets in which flashiness is not so highly valued. We have specialized in certain kinds of popular music (such as Maritime folk or Albertan

country) because we know that ours is a world in which the markers of regional authenticity are the principal hook through which marginal musical forms may build an international audience. The Cirque du Soleil, Imax films and K-Tel compilation records were all devised in Canada, it might be argued, because we have become adept at producing idiosyncratic variations of longstanding and successful cultural forms.

The compensatory position on Canadian culture is easily adapted to the language of cultural policy. Public policy, it suggests, should direct resources to those Canadian cultural producers who might succeed in commercial terms. We have convinced ourselves that the support of more marginal cultural phenomena is, in fact, a realistic way to succeed in internationally markets, catering to specialized tastes which are often underserved by the products of Hollywood or multinational publishing conglomerates.

The advantages of the compensatory position on English Canadian culture are many. It is both a humble and a realistic position, acknowledging that Canadian culture exists within a world culture dominated by the Americans, and that, however unfortunate this fact may be, it is largely irreversible. The culture we deem distinctly Canadian, then, is a culture which has filled in those gaps which American culture has left behind. If Canadian films appear to seek out a human scale unlike that of Hollywood, and if our television programs appear more thoughtful and caring, this is because film and television are funded, in Canada, in ways which encourage these qualities, and devised for audiences and markets which welcome them.

The risk of the compensatory position, its detractors will argue, is that it encourages the development of an English-Canadian culture which is wilfully marginalized. If we expect English-Canadian culture to fill the cultural spaces unserved by American-dominated commercial interests, then we have given up the fight to produce domestic products which will be massively popular and widely-shared. (We will all watch Friends or The Sopranos, then

divide into a dozen smaller audiences to watch the more specialized, Canadian programs which follow.)

Infrastructures and Imaginaries

In an important critique of Canadian cultural policy, Maurice Charland makes the point that the Canadian emphasis on communications infrastructures and technological links across vast geographical distances has given rise to what he calls a “technological nationalism” (Charland, 1986). Canadian governments have been so concerned with the building of connections, he suggests, that they have paid insufficient attention to what will travel along them. The semantic and emotional glue to hold a national culture together was absent from the design of these systems; that glue was provided by the popular culture of the U.S., which has used our communications infrastructures for its own dissemination. “Communication technology,” Charland writes, “heralded as the means of promoting Canadian statehood and nationhood, paradoxically offered those in Canada a common ‘national’ experience which included cultural commodities from the United States” (210).

Charland convincingly suggests that the Canadian state’s emphasis on building media infrastructures has weakened our national imaginary, if only by creating effective pathways for the distribution of U.S. culture within Canada. An emphasis on the channels through which culture travels, rather than the substance which such channels convey, has produced that peculiarly Canadian dilemma: we have one of the world’s most efficient communications infrastructures and, at the same time, a national culture widely regarded as one of the world’s most colonized and weak.

Nevertheless, the strengths of English-Canadian culture (both popular and “high”) are likewise rooted in the richness of the links and networks which have sustained that culture. The traditional concern of cultural critics with the thematic substance of culture has blocked attention to the patterns of interconnection and lines of solidarity which give a culture its rich texture, and which root it in the practices and movements of everyday life. These linkages and networks will often have, as the “content” which travels along or through them, little that fulfils longstanding criteria of “Canadianness.” The great achievement of the Canadian system of artist-run-centres, set in place since the early 1970s, lies much more in the lines of collaboration and communication which this system has enabled and encouraged than in a recognizably distinct (and “Canadian”) body of work produced as its legacy. In the field of popular music, styles and practices which are not indigenously Canadian in any notable sense (such as the disco music produced in Montreal in the 1970s) have been the pretexts around which networks of cultural affinity, and complex relations between the local and the global, have taken shape. In these, as in so many other cases, culture is to be found in the ongoing activity through which people build institutions, join together in collaboration or activist militancy, and circulate the products of their creative labour.

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