

Contemporary Canadian Identity and Culture Interview with Imre Szeman¹

BY GRACIELA MARTÍNEZ-ZALCE*

INTRODUCTION

In 2009, Duke University published *Canadian Cultural Studies: A Reader*, edited by Sourayan Mookerjee, Imre Szeman, and Gail Faurschou. This book answers questions about identity from a very broad perspective, bringing together the traditional and the contemporary, since in the last part, it gathers both the documents on which Canadian twentieth-century cultural policies were based and canonical works that responded to them, by authors like economist Harold Innis, communications theoretician Marshall McLuhan, essayist and literary theoretician Northrop Frye, and artist Paul Émile Borduas, among others. It also brings into play new texts that shed a different light on what Canadian culture has become in the twenty-first century, by Canadian authors of different origins, plus an epilogue in which Yves Laberge makes a comparative analysis of Anglo-Canadian cultural studies and Quebecois cultural criticism, which is in French and has a different intellectual tradition.

Based on the Canadian case, the texts in this anthology span the theorization of the practice of cultural criticism in articles reviewing the nature of Canadian nationalism, multiculturalism based on race and difference, modernity and post-modernity. The fact that the book also recovers documents basic to the understanding of the context in which both the theory and the criticism arose is also fundamental, given that it saves the reader time in the stacks and offers him or her the foundations of both Canada's cultural institutions and industries.

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Our conversation with one of the editors of this fundamental book delves into the importance of these topics for approaching the study of contemporary Canadian culture.



The book you published recently has a very interesting format, because it gives the canonical approach to Canadian cultural studies together with another newer, more disruptive one; but it also gives the reader a very important tool: the original documents stipulating cultural policy. How did you decide on this structure?

IS: The structure was dictated by the ways in which research and teaching in cultural studies take place in Canada. Like Australia, but unlike the United States or the United Kingdom, for instance, there has always been a great deal of attention paid to the ways in which the government has actively tried to produce and manage a specifically “Canadian” culture. The reasons why the government has felt this need are multiple, but at its core lies the necessity for what all nations seem to have: a defined and determined national culture, one with characteristics that mark its difference from the culturally and linguistically very similar nation just to the south: the United States. This is why we include the government documents at the end of the book. They are frequently used in classes on Canadian culture, so having them in the book makes it easier for teachers and researchers to access them.

The bigger divide in the book is between older attempts to make sense of Canada and newer ones. The older texts –classic texts by Northrop Frye, George Grant, Harold Innis and others– remain important documents for understanding initial confrontations with the dilemma of Canadian national and cultural identity. But while they are, in a sense, canonical, their influence on more recent work is less than one might think. Contemporary scholars and students are more likely to draw on Pierre Bourdieu or Gilles Deleuze than on the work of Frye or Innis. We’ve included them in the book in part to get scholars today to take a second look at the work of these figures. We also wanted to introduce a new way of thinking about how one approaches Canada, which is to consider two distinct moments of the production of hegemony –roughly pre-and post-1968– and how intellectuals dealt with or attempted to deal with this. Coming back to the government documents, it’s clear that what the federal government is trying to do in producing and defining culture in the country is work-

ing to generate “consent” to its rule, to naturalize and normalize the rule of a single government over a huge swath of territory filled with people with enormous different histories, languages, traditions, and beliefs.



In the afterword, we notice a nuance that should not be forgotten when approaching the study of Canada, that is, some scholarly work is done in an Anglo-Canadian corpus and other scholarly work is in a Quebecois one. It is done from different perspectives and with different theoretical frameworks. Taking this into account, can we really talk about “Canadian studies” as a whole or will there always be a line between the Canadian as Anglo and the Quebecois?

IS: I think that this line continues to exist, and so, at least within the country, when one does Canadian studies one has to constantly keep in mind the differences that exist between Canada and Quebec (outside of Canada, Canadian Studies seems to already include Quebec). This is starting to change: the most recent Canadian Association of Cultural Studies conference in Montreal this past October had a lively and provocative roundtable on cultural studies in Quebec, which placed the issues raised in the afterword on the table. Scholarly research in Quebec has drawn on models and concepts from France, and has also developed its own approaches to the study of culture over the twentieth century. Globalization is flattening out some of the differences between Anglo-Canada and Quebec. It seems scholars everywhere are, unfortunately, drawing their ideas and approaches from the same small reservoir of cultural and social theorists. For the entire time I’ve been in the Canadian academy the need for humanists and social scientists to create stronger ties across the cultural, linguistic divide between Anglo-Canada and Quebec has been trumpeted, but to no great effect. I think that this may finally be changing.



And what about First Nations and Inuit? Can they be included in this area of academy?

IS: I think so. We made a point of including works by Quebecois and First Nations authors in the book. There is growing awareness of the importance of First Nations communities to both contemporary Canadian life and to the shape of this unwieldy thing called Canada in general. Given the politics and commitments of cultural studies as a field of teaching

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and research, it's necessary and important to consider work by First Nations on nationalism, identity, cultural belonging, tradition, and so on. I'm glad to say that this is being done. I'm normally exceedingly critical of governments in Canada, but I have to say that I'm pleased –and surprised– that the 2010 Olympic Organizing Committee has chosen to accord four First Nations leaders the status of heads of state at the games. This means that Justin George, chief of the 400-member Tsleil-Waututh band in British Colombia, will be able to rub shoulders with Barack Obama and Stephen Harper as their equals –and rightly so.



In Mexico we do not talk about Mexican studies, we simply study history or literature. Why do you think there has been a need to do so in Canada?

Canada is very much a postcolonial country. It wasn't until the 1970s that courses in Canadian literature started to become part of the curriculum. Even today, when one does a degree in English in Canada, one primarily learns the British canon, with a sprinkling of Canadian, postcolonial, and American texts.

IS: The primary reason is, of course, the presence just to the south of another new world colony, sharing the same language and, to a large degree, the same cultural heritage (not just the links to the UK, but immigration from around the world), but with 10 times the population and who happens to be the global cultural hegemon. Canada came to life in the twentieth century, a century dominated by electronic communications that have reshaped experience in a fundamental way. As the country's population is clustered near the U.S. border, we're always in connection with U.S. cultural products. The differences of scale and power means there are more movies, novels, comic books, television programs –you name it– from the U.S. in Canadian households than those produced in Canada. Canadians live in a historically and geographically unique situation. Where else does such a situation exist to this same degree?

Another reason has to do with institutional frameworks. In terms of how university education was established, Canada is very much a post-colonial country. It wasn't until the 1970s that courses in Canadian literature started to become part of the curriculum. Even today, when one does a degree in English in Canada one primarily learns the British canon, with a sprinkling of Canadian, postcolonial and American texts. When one specifies "Canadian literature" or "Canadian history" one is as much naming the specific object of study as engaging in an institutional politics, proclaiming that the literature of this country is as worthy and valuable to study as Beowulf or Virginia Woolf.



As Canadian studies programs are having their support cut off, why do you think it is important to sustain them, to sustain this area of research and to teach it as part of higher education programs?

IS: I may be unpopular for saying this, but I don't think it *is* necessary to have them as part of the curriculum in Canadian universities—at least not in the form that most such programs took. I think it is important to provide support to such programs of research in other parts of the world and I wish the federal government would continue to do so: it's essential to have dialogue about ourselves with others who might be able to see what we're doing and what we're about from a very different perspective. But within Canada? I think Canadian studies is at an end.

Why? As a disciplinary framework, Canadian studies came of age in the 1960s and '70s in conjunction with the federal government's project to define and shape national identity. This project was motivated by many things, perhaps chief amongst them the need to mold new immigrants (who were no longer coming primarily from European countries) to a pre-defined national identity that would render their difference manageable. In Canada, this identity was, of course, that of multiculturalism, an apparent liberal panacea of unity in diversity, which kept existing modalities or power intact while adding to a population always too small for the scale of the country. Canadian studies might not have had the same motivations as the government, though such programs received funding from government sources to carry out their projects. But by focusing on a determination of national characteristics, attempting to locate and shape Canadian canons, and so on, it tended to mirror the politics of the nationalist project at work at other levels of Canadian society. I think, too, that Canadian studies tended to be celebratory rather than critical in ways that unfortunately masked some of the negative aspects of nationalism.

Having said this, Canadian studies was important in getting Canadian subjects and issues accepted into disciplines across the university. Many of my colleagues might disagree with me, but I think that there is ample work on Canada within Canadian universities and colleges. The reason why universities are closing some Canadian studies programs is that students are no longer drawn to them in the way they once were: enrollment is low. As for Canadian studies as a research network: the Association of Canadian Studies is struggling to exist because many researchers, especially those of a younger generation, don't see their aims, interests,

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and approaches reflected in what the association represents. They might be interested in studying phenomena which occur in Canadian space or in the policies of the Canadian government, but they conduct research without an insistence of the Canadianness of the phenomena in question. Which is a positive development for research on Canada, I think.



Recently, in a panel on film studies, one person in the audience asked why was it that film scholars still talked about what was Canadian in Canadian film instead of talking about style, structure, and so on. Do you think it's still important to make a point about the national characteristics of either works of art or popular culture products? Why do you think it still happens when dealing with Canadian ones?

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IS: I think I already touched on this above. But let me go at it again. While it is important to note the context from which something originates, I think that an insistence on national characteristics can blunt analysis as much as aid it. The assumption is, for instance, that national life creates differences of a kind that are *a)* especially significant and *b)* the consequence or outcome of the nation. It isn't really the abstract thing called "the nation" that produces such characteristics or distinctions, but the networks in which individuals move, the institutions they take part in, and so on. For us moderns, these are often –but not always– confined to specific national spaces due to the nature of citizenship and belonging. If we insist on generating autobiographies of cultural products, I'd rather we look to such networks. And when we do that, it comes as no surprise that there are often other nationals involved within them, or that "our" nationals picked up ideas from studies abroad or from reading foreign books, and so on. The nation is often a shorthand for just these kinds of analyses. At the same time, I think we often defer too much to it when we simply assume that an arbitrary geographic space inevitably marks the culture produced within it. It does, but not in ways that are so simple to name and puzzle out.

Why this does still happen in Canada? To me, it's in part a hangover from the legacy of Canadian studies as a practice, in part due to what we've been trained to do when we deal with Canadian cultural texts.



Is identity still an important issue to analyze in cultural production? Is nation still an important part of its construction?

IS: Identity remains important in relation to cultural production, though my own feeling is that it is too much of a focus –but what else might one expect from a liberal, capitalist world in which the individual and identity are all important? And nation remains important in its construction, despite rumors of its death from globalization, new media, or other factors.

I've spent a lot of my career thinking about the nation and national culture. I think we don't often recognize what an incredible social technology the nation really is: a fiction which through the density of the institutions, beliefs, and practices that have been created in its name over several centuries has become real. It is the strongest modality of spatial belonging that exists –strong enough that people separated by huge distances will identify with one another as part of the same tribe, and powerful enough to compel people to fight and die for it. Though the level of patriotism associated with the great wars of the twentieth century has declined, it remains relatively easy to enable nationalist sentiment and feeling: witness how people view the Olympics or the World Cup, or the ways in which right-wing parties can stoke nationalist sentiment against immigrants. The ways in which nation contributes to identity might have changed over the past century, but it remains a necessary element of how we think of identity today.



Since we share the same strategic closeness to the U.S. and the same economic region, do you think the case of Mexico is similar to Canada's in terms of the construction of cultural identity today, given that their cultural industries are not as strong as the ones at the U.S.?

IS: The proper, cautious, scholarly response would be to say that there are similarities, yes, but also many differences. But let me be drop caution for a moment. I once made the point that Canada was more similar to Brazil than to Scandinavian or other European countries in terms of its status and role in global political economy and the way this role is then figured in the traumas and problems of national culture (See "Literature on the Periphery of Capitalism," *Ilha do Desterro* [Brazil] 40 [January-June 2001]: 25-42.). Canada and Mexico are the sole neighbors of the most powerful country in the planet's history, one especially powerfully in terms of its cultural industries. The ideologies manifested and exported in these cultural industries, and their impact on those closest to the United States, should not be discounted.

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Canadians don't pay enough attention to Mexico. And they need to, not just because it would be worthwhile to better understand a rich and vibrant part of the world close to them, but because by doing so they might well better understand themselves.