

Beyond Boomer Nationalism

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If you type CanLit or Canadian literature into Google, you get our home page. And it seems appropriate to announce at this point that there were 24,000 hits in the last 30 days on the back issues that have been free online there since the end of October 2009. This is incredible, even more so given that it's summer as I write: can all this traffic be generated by panicked assistant professors trying to publish before September tolls? We cannot bask in this statistic, however. Here is a response to our survey asking about how readers use these free PDFs: "I look around in vain for interesting content." What to make of this reply? Here at *Canadian Literature* we realize that we shouldn't identify too strongly with "CanLit," because CanLit is generally taken to be a literature, and we are a critical journal. However, CanLit (the literature) also seems in need of more interesting content. Here is another comment on what would be welcome on our website: "Interesting, NEW content by not yet established writers. The same old Canadian writers are BORING and so are the new that get through." So *Canadian Literature* (the journal), Canadian literature (the literature), and CanLit (either or both) are boring. It is hard not to become a shade defensive.

It is not only anonymous survey respondents who find CanLit (the literature) boring and old-fashioned. Douglas Coupland, in his 2006 article in the *New York Times* titled "Can Lit," writes "One could say that CanLit is the literary equivalent of representational landscape painting, with small forays into waterfowl depiction and still lifes. It is not a modern art form, nor does it want to be." Like Coupland, Steven W. Beattie in "Fuck Books: Some Notes

on Canned Lit" (*Canadian Notes and Queries*) argues that the most popular Canadian writers look to an "idealized past"—and goes on to blame Michael Ondaatje for popularizing a heightened poetic style that Beattie feels has become the norm for any novel likely to be nominated for a major literary award. Under the title "Raging against the Tyranny of Canadian Literature" in the *Toronto Star* in October 2007, Stephen Marche, who detects very little heightened style in Canlit, writes, "In Canada, we are the oatmeal of world literature. We are on the cutting edge of blandness." Remembering the sense of unutterable boredom that came over me when my grade eight teacher extolled Bliss Carman (she came from the first wave of Canadian literary nationalism, dating from the period after World War I), I forgive these young people. Perhaps rage and frustration at the inexplicable success of one's totally boring predecessors is required to drive art (or fashions in art) forward. (Harold Bloom calls this the anxiety of influence, an Oedipal theory that requires the younger generation of poets to kill off its fathers—how this might affect women writers is left unexplored).

Coupland writes "Last year I was flipping TV channels and, on channel 821, watched a live broadcast of CanLit's annual award ceremony, the Gillers, piped in from a Toronto ballroom. It was as if I'd tuned into the Monster Mash—not a soul under 60, and I could practically smell the mummy dust in the room." He doesn't mention that two of the nominees that year were younger than he is—and two others only a year or two older. Indeed, under some definitions, Coupland is that horrid and despicable creature, a boomer (some end the boomer generation in 1960, others in 1964; Coupland was born in 1961, for most the beginning of Gen X). I realize that *New York Times* articles aren't intended to be profound historical works, but what is Coupland going to say when he wins the Giller (he was long-listed in 2006)? Won't this comment seem a shade embarrassing? But perhaps the tyrant of Canadian literature is keeping notes to ensure that this never happens. Or perhaps Coupland will be over 60 by then too. Annoying though it might be that Munro and Atwood and Ondaatje just keep on publishing, readers keep reading them, too. And these same readers also read Coupland (doesn't everyone?).

But the issue is not simply a psychological one. All three critics appear fixated on the Giller (the 2010 short list for the \$50,000 prize will likely be out around the time you read this). Too many old writers (or young writers who write like old writers) are nominated for and win this prize, apparently. Marche comments that "The danger is that the Giller, like the CBC, will

become just another institution for boomer self-congratulation” and asks “whether Canlit as a phenomenon is more than one generation long.” Finally he concludes that “The message for young Canadian writers could not be clearer: If you want success, you’re going to have to find it elsewhere. Wasn’t the whole point of Canadian literary nationalism, begun so long ago, to avoid exactly this situation?” (“So long ago” appears to be a reference to what I will call the second wave of literary nationalism, post-World War II, which one could connect to the Massey Commission in 1951, and yes, even to the founding of *Canadian Literature*). The fear is, obviously, that the “normal” shift from one generation of writers to the next will not take place in Canada because writers won’t be able to find sources of income. Nick Mount’s *When Canadian Literature Moved to New York* deals with an early iteration of this problem, when the world depression of 1873 sent Canadian writers to New York in search of income. (John Richardson, the “father” of Canadian literature is said to have starved to death there in 1852: perhaps a portent?)

Coupland dates the end of the subsidies that fuelled the writing of the boomer generation to 1985. He doesn’t say that this was the year after Brian Mulroney and the Conservative party won against the Liberals who had held power since 1963 (Joe Clark notwithstanding). Canadian nationalism was channelled by the Liberals to contain Quebec and to integrate immigrants (although it notably failed to assimilate Native people), and so it’s hardly surprising that in 1985, and now again with the Harper government, the subsidies are cut and cultural producers find themselves reduced to snapping at each other over corporate prizes (it is the *Scotiabank* Giller Prize, don’t forget). In the introduction to *Canadian Cultural Studies: A Reader*, Sourayan Mookerjia, Imre Szeman, and Gail Faurschou write that Canada’s evolution “between empires” explains its relation to the two “world revolutions” of 1848 (ours were the Mackenzie-Papineau rebellions in 1837 and 1838 against Britain) and then of 1968, against the US, when Trudeau symbolized (for good or ill) cultural and economic protectionism. Globalization pulls nationalisms apart with new trade agreements (for example, NAFTA, under Mulroney) and underlies the Harper government’s dismantling of programs of cultural subsidy. No surprise that Margaret Atwood—that icon of boomer hegemony—has been prominent in acting against both of these moves, for example, in the publication *If You Love this Country* (1987) and in publicly agreeing with Gilles Duceppe’s condemnation of Harper’s cuts to the arts. Described by the CBC as “CanLit Queen,” she said she would vote for the sovereigntist Bloc if she lived in Quebec: Harper’s description of the arts as a

“niche issue” lost him crucial seats in Quebec, where culture *is* politics.

Coupland believes in the subsidization of the arts because Canada has no cultural economies of scale: “I think the Canadian government ought to be hurling 10 times as much cash at literary arts in general, CanLit as much as anything else.” Yet he doesn’t appear to realize the extent to which Canadian identity has been tied to a particular political party and then commodified (although he’s just designed a fashion line for Roots, a global company that began in 1973 as a nostalgic look back at an Ontario summer camp). Other Canadians have attempted to analyze the problem of commodification and corporatization: Naomi Klein’s *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (2000) and the ideas of the Vancouver-based *Adbusters* were recently countered by *The Rebel Sell: Why the Culture Can’t be Jammed*, (2004) by Canadian philosophers Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter. How the subjectivities produced in Canadian literature derive from and feed into the political and the economic is a topic that needs more attention, and Katja Lee’s work on Mowat and celebrity culture in this issue moves in this direction. The ways in which some Canadian authors have managed their celebrity (a topic Lorraine York also considers in *Literary Celebrity in Canada*) points to the need to scrutinize binaries such as public and private, making money and making art, popular and high culture.

But it is fair to ask why *Canadian Literature* has published reviews, but no articles, on Coupland’s work (Glenn Deer does give Coupland two pages in “Remapping Vancouver,” #199). The *MLA Bibliography* lists thirty articles with him in the keywords, about twelve of which are focused solely on him. Several reasons occur to me right off. Academic literary critics might not be teaching him much, which means they aren’t writing about him much. (If you like a book—or your students like it enough—to teach it for several years, the article has almost written itself. Or they aren’t sending their papers to us because they are not even in literature departments, but teaching in film, fine art, or communications. Articles in *Canadian Literature* deal with the entire canon, and not all articles are focused on particular authors. It takes a while for authors to become canonical: it’s significant that the ten Canadian authors Alex Good and Steven W. Beattie deem “over-rated” in their recent article in the *National Post*, are not, with the exception of Michael Ondaatje and possibly Erin Mouré, in my view, canonical. (To define “canonical” would take an article in itself, but canonical authors I take to be those most taught in university). Coupland is on this “over-rated” list—which supports my point. (Maybe being over-rated is a stage on the way to becoming canonical.)

Or it could be that his books aren't "Canadian" in the ways typically associated with "Canadian literature." Those of us who cut our teeth on the second-year Canadian literature survey course know how insidious the grip of nationalism can be. We all were working so hard to show how distinctive Canadian literature was that reading American literature for comparative purposes seemed like selling out. As I've written before, the name of this journal was a manifesto in 1959; that it now names boredom for some requires us to scrutinize both words. Once "Canadian" was a void needing in-fill. Then it often became a set of pieties. Now, it requires rethinking, which might mean—among other things—that we write about it from broader perspectives: one of these being that of globalization.

How do definitions of "literature" affect Coupland? What he writes is often seen as pop culture rather than literature. In an interview in the *Montreal Gazette* (4 Jan. 2000), he remarks "Since World War II, high and low culture have been melted together. . . . People think pop culture and literature are separate spheres that should never join together. Well, why?" Heath and Potter (or Pierre Bourdieu) might have the answer: taste demarcates social groups and classes, and so the quest for distinction drives fashion, the arts, and ultimately, consumption in a generational and class-based way. University literature departments tend to uphold high culture (I and many others fought to write PhD theses about Canadian literature, regarded as of dubious importance in the late 1970s, at least at the University of Toronto). Now, however, pop culture is gaining respectability in literature departments. Brenna Clarke Gray, currently a PhD student, in a notice for a presentation titled "Suburban Stories: Reclaiming Douglas Coupland for CanLit" notes that Coupland "is rarely studied in terms of Canadian-ness" and indeed "is often assumed to be American." She argues to the contrary that "Coupland's writing and visual art is informed deeply by his nationality, and to consider him generically North American is to miss out on much of what he does." She acknowledges that Coupland has expressed anxiety about being seen as "CanLit," but sees this anxiety as tied to the lack of urban/suburban stories in the canon. She concludes that our sense of the meaning of CanLit should be broadened—and I agree. Certainly Coupland's definition of it as the literary equivalent of the Group of Seven is disingenuous. Of course, like many, he might resist incorporation into "CanLit" in order to remain in the rebellious outsider pose that has served many Canadian writers well (whether they identify as from "outsider" regions, like the TISH poets, or profess "outsider" identities tied to ethnicity, gender, or sexuality). Indeed, this sort of resistance to

nationalist and stylistic conformity generates useful controversy and leads to publicity for Canadian writers, whatever their “rating.” It also can lead to more critical attitudes to the canon, celebrity, literary prizes, and subsidies for the arts. The conclusion is, then, that we need to broaden our gaze beyond national boundaries and nationalist theories, we need to broaden our conception of literature, and we need to teach and write about a range of genres and authors outside the canon. Then perhaps we won’t be so bored.

This issue contains articles on some literary stalwarts of the older generation (Atwood, Farley Mowat, and Yves Thériault) and on some younger writers (Madeleine Thien and Wayne Johnston). Atwood and Thériault are certainly canonical. Indeed, Mowat, like Coupland, writes for a popular audience, which in Lee’s view has prevented the academy from taking his work seriously. Nor are the approaches to these works limited to those framed by nationalism (or resistance to it). Kevin Flynn looks at Johnston using a theory of secular conversion. Katja Lee looks at Mowat through the lens of theories of celebrity culture. François Ouellet traces the themes of paternity, incest, and fidelity through Thériault’s oeuvre. Lee Rozelle looks at Atwood from an eco-critical perspective. Jeanette den Toonder references linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, semiotician Yuri Lotman, and philosopher Gaston Bachelard in her reading of Thériault. And Y-Dang Troeung looks at Thien using theories of trauma, memory, and mourning.

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Finally, I would like to thank Rejean Beaudoin and Larissa Lai, who are both stepping down as Associate Editors after this issue, for their many contributions to the journal. Rejean’s abilities as an editor and his large network of francophone critics will be impossible to replace. The same can be said of Larissa’s poetic eye and large network of English Canadian poets. We have been fortunate to have them associated with the journal and we wish them both all the best in their future literary and critical endeavours.

