

# Strategic Cultural Nationalism

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We love our hockey. We love our beer. We love our arts.  
—Advertisement for CBC Radio's "Q," 2009

In September 2008, a most extraordinary thing happened in Canada. Culture became *the* central issue in a federal election campaign, briefly eclipsing discussions of climate change and the economy. It ignited, in the bellicose language of the day, the latest rendition of “Canada’s culture war.” National attention was sparked by the announcement of 45 million dollars in cuts from the government arts and culture budget. Speaking in Saskatchewan, Prime Minister Stephen Harper clearly miscalculated public opinion on the importance of the link between culture and national identity when he called culture a “niche issue”: “You know, I think when ordinary working people come home, turn on the TV and see a gala of a bunch of people, you know, at a rich gala, all subsidized by the taxpayers, claiming their subsidies aren’t high enough when they know the subsidies have actually gone up, I’m not sure that’s something that resonates with ordinary people” (qtd. in O’Malley). Opposition leaders seized the topic in the televised debates, particularly in reference to the specificities of Quebec culture, with Bloc Québécois leader Gilles Duceppe asking Harper: “How can you recognize the Quebec nation and then cut culture [funding], which is the soul of a nation?” Further emphasizing the issue in the context of Quebec, the NDP launched an ad campaign calling Harper’s party the “*Conserva-tueur de la culture*” or “Culture killers.” However, the issue was by no means limited to Quebec, as the outrage sparked across the country clearly demonstrated. “Ordinary people” responded in droves on radio phone-in shows and in editorial blogs, in classrooms and coffee shops, on doorsteps with canvassing politicians and in town hall meetings with concerned citizens defending the welfare of culture in Canada. If Harper was trying to tap into what Scott

Bakker calls the “low-brow resentment” of culture, he appears to have failed. Instead, he resurrected a longstanding ideological debate about government support for the arts.

Canadians were once again engaged in a public dialogue on the role of public funding of the nation’s creative communities, as they had been in the 1850s (when Thomas D’Arcy McGee proclaimed “no literature, no national life—that is an irrevocable law”), the 1880s (when writers lamenting the lack of local publishing outlets called for government intervention), the 1930s (when the Aird Commission made recommendations that led to the creation of the National Film Board and the Canadian Broadcasting Company), the 1950s (when the Massey Report supported the creation of the Canada Council and increased funding for the National Library), the 1960s (when Canadian content regulations were introduced for radio and television broadcasters), and the 1980s (with the debate around the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement). Traditionally, artists have been on both sides of the open market versus protectionism debate (as Frank Davey illustrates in his discussion of free trade in *Post-National Arguments*), but this time the side arguing that aesthetic merit alone should guide culture was remarkably quiet in the noise occasioned by the cuts. Harper’s “niche” comment triggered a country-wide discussion of creativity, the allocation of resources, and state policy. The message was clear: culture is important to Canadians as Canadians. What was a little less clear was the role contemporary Canadians would prefer the government to play in supporting the arts.

Some cultural commentators focused on the economic benefits to the nation of a vibrant arts community and others concentrated on the devastating effects funding cuts to arts programs would have on the constantly shifting views of Canadian identity. In a *Globe and Mail* article running under the heading “To be creative is, in fact, Canadian,” Margaret Atwood summed up the sentiments of many artists as she aligned Canadian identity squarely with Canadian artistic production—high, low, and middle brow—poems, songs, gardens, quilts, costumes, operas, and origami included. She continued: “For decades, we’ve been punching above our weight on the world stage—in writing, in popular music and in many other fields. Canada was once a cultural void on the world map, now it’s a force.” She persisted, “Canadians, it seems, like making things, and they like appreciating things that are made.” Still, there was some dissent. For instance, writing in the *National Post*, D’Arcy Jenish countered arguments about the value of public support of the Canada Council by pointing out that “Canada produced many

fine writers, painters, composers and other artists in those apparently dreary pre-council times.<sup>21</sup> And yet, the dominant mood in the country seemed to strongly favour a renewed sense of commitment to the arts as a national priority. When ordinary people came out swinging in response to Harper, they repeatedly made the link between identity, culture, and a mandate for government support of the arts. This is the key: popular cultural nationalism in Canada means, at least in some part, institutional and public support of culture.

But cultural nationalism is not a static concept, or, at least in this recent iteration, necessarily a celebratory one or one based on nostalgic longing for coherence or national commonality. Canadians showed that they were invested in national culture without resorting to an uncritical celebration of all things red and white. Ordinary Canadians championing public support of the arts set aside the well-known Canadian tendency toward self-deprecation in their comments on the merits of contemporary Canadian art, but they did not relinquish a sense of irony or skepticism in their discussions of the social role of culture. The cultural nationalism voiced by many Canadians during the election showed that as a national characteristic creativity, in Atwood's sense, and the concomitant commitment to public funding of arts programs and artists, was something that the government should feel obliged to get behind.

The cultural nationalism that came to the fore in Canada in response to Harper's comments in 2008 differs from past iterations of cultural nationalism. Echoes of Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent's introduction of the Massey Commission in 1949 could be heard: "it is in the national interest to give encouragement to institutions which express *national feeling*, promote *common understanding* and add to the variety and richness of Canadian life, rural as well as urban" (my italics, *Order in Council*). However, the current round of cultural nationalism no longer seems to be driven by a desire for a common understanding of Canada. Canadians appear to widely recognize that such a singular version of Canada is untenable in a multicultural, multi-racial, multilingual, and multi-ethnic society. Popular cultural nationalism reflects the values of the new millennium in other ways as well. It is not focused on defining Canadian culture through negation (whereby Canadian art is Canadian because it is emphatically not American or British), not motivated by fear of cultural annexation (as St. Laurent and the authors of the Massey Report were), not provoked by the anxiety of influence, and not predicated on exclusionist notions of identity (as it has been in the past). Cultural nationalism is no longer aligned with radical 1960s anti-establishment thinking and decolonization movements around the globe either. Such a

sense of radical nationalism no longer holds the moral weight many thought it carried in the 1960s. The increasing recognition of Canadian colonial exploitation of indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities has dampened celebratory and uncontested nationalism. The more exclusionary nationalism of the past has been replaced by popular cultural frameworks that allow room for a multiplicity of Canadas. Over the past few decades, Canadian writers and critics have moved beyond a desire for a unified nationalism in favour of more ethnic, regional, gender, and class diversity. Instead of the tired image of the mosaic, I think of such intersecting nationalisms in Canada (cultural, ethnic, civic, and imagined) as oscillating circles of nationalism—nations within nations and nations overlapping with nations in the same space. An individual can be located within several spheres at the same time. Perhaps this is all wishful thinking on my part and I am ventriloquizing my own position onto ordinary Canadians, but I don't think so. The displays of popular cultural nationalism during the election were not predicated on ethnic affiliation or constructions of coherence, but on assertions of the value of art and culture in multiple national imaginaries within Canada.

The story about the election and the culture war complicates the relationship between cultural nationalism and civic and ethnic nationalisms, forcing us to consider them in conjunction. I return to Atwood, one of Canada's most vocal nationalists, to consider the implications of her public support of Gilles Duceppe in the last election. The separatist leader was adamant about the need for federal support of culture for the survival of the Quebec nation. Atwood chose to back his position in the culture wars even though his stance on Quebec sovereignty so clearly opposes her own. Making clear the link between the limitations of globalization and the need for strengthened nationalism, Duceppe maintained that, "In Quebec, and I think in Canada, the presence of Ms. Atwood reminds us, not only is culture the backbone of our national identity, it is also a huge part of our economy" (qtd. in Friesen). He continued to address the problems of economic globalization and its threat to culture: "Our culture cannot be outsourced to China. Culture is our future, as much to nourish our souls as to nourish our stomachs. We don't want to live on Planet Hollywood" (qtd. in Friesen). While he adheres to the romantic notion of culture as a window to the soul, he also warns that the cuts to cultural funding fuel the threats of China and America to economic and cultural sovereignty. Remember the context out of which Duceppe is speaking. While supporting the link between art and nationhood, Duceppe was also drawing on the motion that was passed in parliament in 2006,

under the leadership of Prime Minister Harper: “That this House recognize that the Québécois form a nation within a united Canada.” So in 2008 when Duceppe was arguing for government support of culture, the reminder to Harper of Quebec cultural nationalism was a reminder of how tenuous Quebec’s position within the larger nation really is. Throwing her own cultural capital behind Duceppe, Atwood admitted how “ironic” her choice was (qtd. in Friesen). In a move that parallels strategic voting, or voting for the candidate who seems most likely to beat the party you least want in power, it seems that Atwood strategically chose cultural nationalism over a more patriotic nationalism. Indeed, the *Globe and Mail* headline points to such strategic voting as it announces, “Atwood rallies anti-Tory votes by backing Bloc.” Atwood’s response to the present danger of the Conservative government’s dismissal of culture as a niche interest trumped the possible future dangers of a separatist victory, even the one being signalled by Duceppe.

If I had been in doubt about the lasting nature of cultural nationalism before the debate sparked by Harper’s comments in September, I certainly couldn’t be afterwards. The response solidified my growing sense that nationalism is making a popular comeback, not just in cultural terms and not just in Canada. Trade barriers loosened by globalization are being tightened in the economic slowdown of today, and border security is being beefed up in countries around the globe. The resurgence of the nation as the primary affiliation in much contemporary public discourse is evident in the protectionist language in the United States that comes out of the bolstering of national pride in the new Obama administration (note that President Obama used the word “nation” more than any other word in his inauguration speech—18 times). It is also getting louder in Canada. However, one need only think of the continued debate over sovereignty in Quebec or, in another framework, the strength of indigenous nationalisms to realize how complex “nationalism” is in Canada. Indeed, long before Confederation many “nations” coexisted—albeit with widely divergent degrees of power—within the geographic spaces of Canada. In many ways, the multiple cultural nationalisms of Quebeckers, immigrants and migrants, or First Nations citizens challenge coherent definitions of both a broader Canadian culture and the Canadian state itself.<sup>2</sup> Whether we think in terms of borders or passports, laws or flags, nationalism is irrevocably part of the practice of everyday life.

During the 2008 election, the public marked culture as the responsibility of the state and firmly linked it to nationalism. However, controversies like that sparked during the election campaign remind us that state practice does

not always equal public opinion. And precisely because of the ubiquity of civic nationalism in what threatens to become a post-global age as the recession deepens, I want to argue here that we need to be especially attuned to the realities of newly invigorated cultural nationalisms as well.

In Diana Brydon's terms, new directions in Canadian culture necessitate overturning the myth of the "national dream" in favour of imagining Canada within a "planetary" context (16). I think that while the dream is dispensable and the myth can use an overhaul, the nation isn't going to go away. Just as we have had to ask where the local and the national sit in globalization, we also have to ask where the globe sits in the current climate of increased nationalism. Even global citizens are located somewhere, grounded even, within a state (or moving between states) governed by laws and priorities. If popular cultural nationalism is as strong as I suspect it is, it is also imperative that we historicize it and critically engage in the study of nations in their legal and social contexts. We should learn the lessons of diasporic theories about group formation and the significance of group affiliation as we consider how ethnic, racial, and social identities might overlap, of theories of critical race studies about the ideologies that have dominated national priorities, and of studies of multiculturalism that are skeptical of government-directed notions of community. Even as we talk about the interconnectedness of humans in a planetary context and we study the arbitrariness of borders and the impact traversing those borders has on people, it is still necessary to locate national cultures in the framework of a history of laws, practices, and preferences. If context contains memory, then it is also vital to consider social, political, and historically specific contexts to remember what is, or has been, done in the name of the nation.<sup>3</sup>

In registering their disagreement with the Prime Minister during the election campaign, many Canadians were contesting the way that their values and preferences were not reflected by the current Canadian government. Harper won a minority government (rather than the majority that was predicted), some say, in part because of his stand on culture. Certainly, many ordinary Canadians voted for Harper. But I would argue that because of the way in which public support of the arts became an election issue, strategic cultural nationalism was practiced by a large number of Canadians. The response to Harper often focused (sometimes in rhetorical terms verging on hyperbole) on how unethical it was for the government to abandon culture. Turning the tables, one should ask about the ethics of cultural nationalism as well. Further, what does it mean to also be a cultural citizen? In her

response to Harper, Atwood asks “What sort of country do we want to live in? What sort of country do we already live in?” These are important questions for artists and activists but also for bankers and politicians and voters. Indeed, it seems many Canadians asked just such questions in conversations about culture, national identity, and institutional support of the arts during the election of 2008. I suspect that such questions led to conversations about Native self-determination, Quebec sovereignty, individual rights and freedoms, and Canadians’ positions in the world as global citizens.

In 1857, a decade before Confederation, Irish-settler-cum-politician Thomas D’Arcy McGee wrote with passion about the link between nationhood and culture in an essay provocatively titled “Protection for Canadian Literature”: “Every country, every nationality, every people, must create and foster a National Literature, if it is their wish to preserve a distinct individuality from other nations. If precautions are not taken to secure this end, the distinctive character and features of a people must disappear” (305). McGee was advocating Canadian nationalism (as opposed to the more extreme forms of Fenian nationalism he had been involved with that advocated armed resistance and the forced annexation of British Canada to the independent United States), perhaps because Canada seemed like a place where many nationalities could (and should) get along. As it happened, in the fall of 2008 I was teaching McGee’s essay in my Canadian literature class the week after Harper’s comments spawned such controversy. My students sat up and took notice. What, I suspect, had been a rather dull historical essay suddenly became a timely intervention into contemporary debates. The students read McGee against Harper, and McGee won. McGee was among the first in a long line of cultural nationalists who argued vociferously about the important role a strong literature plays in nation building. While I doubt a “distinct individuality” is possible, or even remotely desirable, in Canada now and I am certain that there is no singular National Literature, McGee’s commitment to sustaining the link between creative work, public support, and communal identity clearly endures with ordinary Canadians in contemporary iterations of strategic cultural nationalism.

In the spirit of opening up Canadian literature to a variety of visions of the nation, several articles in this issue address changing concepts of Canadian culture, canonical texts, complex Canadian identities, and cultural institutions. A flourishing national debate about literature, public support of arts and culture, and sharp critical analyses of that culture are crucial to a nation where different perspectives do not lead to extremist positions, but to more

carefully articulated ones. Examining the effects of technology on literary community, Tony Tremblay and Ellen Rose ask whether the “literary ethos in the relatively closed, high-modern nationalist world of the printed little magazines of mid-century is transferable to the more open, polysemous postmodern spheres of today’s digitized online magazines.” Erica Kelly carefully reads the ambiguities in E.J. Pratt’s long poem *Towards the Last Spike* and, questioning the “price of national unity,” shows how the poem is much more than the uncritical celebration of the national dream it has often been read to be. Focusing on ambiguity from another direction, Janice Fiamengo revisits Sinclair Ross’s fraught depictions of Christianity in *As For Me and My House* and investigates the ramifications of a rejection of faith. Tim McIntyre closely reads Alice Munro’s story “The Moons of Jupiter” to consider Munro’s cathartic use of language and form. In another vein, troubling the closed identities of “la francophonie de souche,” Eileen Lohka theorizes “les écritures de la migrance” by looking at “la notion de frontière(s) et de territoire” and suggests how literature reflects the interstitial spaces of “les écrivains sans frontières” who write in Manitoba and in Quebec. Finally, Joubert Satyre examines the fictional work of Émile Ollivier and Gérard Étienne, “des écrivains migrants d’origine haïtienne établis en Quebec,” to consider exile, nostalgia, and the haunting nightmares that often accompany recountings of migration in literature. Thus, even those papers not specifically grappling with nationalism in this issue forward our thinking about evolving visions of Canadian culture, society, and writing.

#### NOTES

- 1 See also “Readers’ Forum: Culture, the Government, and the Public Good.” *English Studies in Canada* 33.3 (Sept. 2007).
- 2 Thanks to Jennifer Delisle for making this point and for her many other helpful comments on this editorial.
- 3 Over the years, there is no question that some forms of Canadian nationalism have been exclusionary and narrow-minded. You were Canadian if you were “this” and not “that.” Often the “this” and “that” were configured in racialized terms. Such exclusions were cemented in law in the Indian Act, the Chinese Immigration Act, and the Immigration Act, to name a few. In my Canadian Studies class, I teach case studies from the legal history of racism in Canada because I want to show the ways in which the more abstract concepts of racism were grounded in very real terms in the law within the borders of the nation and how these laws differed from those in the United States or France or New Zealand.

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