Immunize-Nation: Hollywood Contagion and the Biopolitics of the Canadian Nation-Building Project

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Abstract This exploratory essay investigates the fruitfulness of thinking about the intersection of fears of contagion and the construction of national cultural boundaries in relation to cultural nationalist discourse in general and to the specific Canadian nation-building project. It begins by tracing the rise of biopolitical discourses on contagion in the 19th century, explores how these discourses took on a moral-cultural character with the rise of fears of “moral contagion” and “moral degeneracy” and demonstrates how the latter fears were central to early formulations of the cultural policy/media literacy apparatus in the Victorian period. It then investigates how this Victorian fear of cultural contagion continues to animate contemporary Canadian cultural policy discourse and, through a reading of some of the Heritage Minutes, contemporary Canadian cultural nationalist texts.

In their introduction to a special issue of American Literary History titled “Contagion and Culture”, Priscilla Wald and her co-editors make an interesting argument: “Cultural margins and national borders are often summoned, if not articulated, through the figure of specific contagious diseases...contagion and (national) culture were [thus] mutually constituted terms even before late-nineteenth century bacteriology” (Wald et al. 2002, 617). In this exploratory essay, I want to investigate the fruitfulness of thinking about this intersection of fears of contagion and the construction of national cultural boundaries in relation to Canadian cultural nationalist discourse in general and in relation to a specific nation-building project.

While, to my knowledge, there has been no systematic research done on this relationship in the Canadian context, there does exist a small body of research coming out of feminist-inflected cultural studies on the discursive construction of the Canadian nation as an anthropomorphized and sexualized body (cf. Atwood 1972; Berland 1995; Mackey 1999) as well as a growing interest among media scholars in applying some of Foucault’s work on governmentality and biopolitics to the study of Canadian cultural policy and institutions (Dowler 1996; Druick 2007). Furthermore, those familiar with Canadian cultural discourse will recognize the manner in which the language of cultural contagion and pollution can even find its way into contemporary accounts of Canadian cultural development. Ryan Edwardson’s recent Canadian Content: Culture and the Quest for Nationhood, for example, seems to playfully reproduce the biopolitical undertones of Canadian cultural policy discourse: “Simply put, if left unrestrained, mass media polluted the body politic, but if brought into accordance with nationalist interests, they could be used to disseminate cultured Canadian content that would
contribute to the nation’s moral and spiritual constitution.” (Edwardson 2008, 41). This essay is offered, therefore, as an attempt to begin to fill the gap in the Canadian literature on culture and biopolitics by start drawing on some of the existing literature in order to better articulate the relationship between discourses of contagion and nation in Canada and to demonstrate how those discourses work to structure a specific project of nation-building.

Canada as a Sexualized Body

In the final report of the Canadian Culture Online Program’s Advisory Board titled “A Charter for the Cultural Citizen Online”, an ominous warning is sounded: “While broadband networks may connect more Canadians to each other, they also have the perverse effect of opening the door to domination by foreign content, which could happen all the more rapidly if Canadian content is a limited choice. Federal and provincial governments have given priority to the pipes—hence allowing the penetration of foreign product—while paying far too little attention to the funding of our own cultural content” (Canadian Culture Online 2004, 11).

All of this talk of “perversion”, “pipes”, “connecting”, “domination” and “penetration” suggest the extent to which biopolitical metaphors of the sexualized body can find their ways into even the most otherwise banal Canadian culturecromatic documents. In “Marginal Notes on Cultural Studies in Canada”, Jody Berland argues that such sexualized metaphors have traditionally underpinned Canadian cultural nationalist discourse. She writes that: “the metaphor of the woman seeking to protect a fertile but vulnerable body from the imperialist ravages of a powerful neighbour has long been a staple of Canadian culture…the feminized Canadian has been an instrument in the circulation of fictions, metaphors and interventions which render Canadian culture as closer to nature, aesthetically highbrow, non-violent, uncorrupted, committed to public good but powerless before the masculinized figures of external authority” (Berland 1995, 520).

While Berland asserts that this anthropomorphization of Canada as a passive and dependent body has typically gendered Canada as a woman, the quote from the CCOP report suggests another possible reading. In its deployment of the term “perverse” to describe the effects of “opening the door” to “foreign penetration”, the particular articulation of the sexualized discourse of Canadian dependency links up with traditional medical-psychiatric discourses of male homosexuality as a pathological “perversion”. If we accept Cynthia Enloe’s contention that “nationalism has typically sprung from masculinised memory, masculinised humiliation and masculinised hope. Anger at being ‘emasculated’…has been the natural fuel for igniting many nationalist movements” (Enloe, 1990: 44) and if we bear in mind the long history of homosexuality being identified as “unpatriotic” and antinationalist (Kinsman and Gentile 2009; Peterson 1999), then the full ramifications of this equation of the perverse effects of American penetration on the Canadian nation becomes manifest. In its construction of Canada as a “perverted” male body that repeatedly opens itself to penetration by contagious American content, it warns of that body’s imminent emasculation, degeneration and death.

A Brief Genealogy of Cultural Contagion

Accompanying this biopolitical figuring of the Canadian nation as a sexualized body that must be protected from penetration and contagion is a set of models for intervention into the cultural lifeworld taken from public health discourse. In
tracking this intersection of public health and cultural policy discourse in Canada, recent cultural histories of contagion can provide us with important clues. In their introduction to *Contagion: Historical and Cultural Studies*, Alison Bashford and Claire Hooker describe contagion in a way that closely resembles Canadian anxieties about the effects of American culture on Canadians: “Contagion requires contact, but it also implies more than this: it implies absorption, invasion, vulnerability, the breaking of a boundary imagined as secure in which the other becomes part of the self. Contagion connotes both a *process* of contact and transmission, and a substantive, self-replicating *agent*, and is centrally concerned with the growth and multiplication of this agent.” (Bashford and Hooker 2001, 4) Because contagion raises the possibility that the national body has been breached, that it has been made vulnerable and that it has become “infected” with “viruses” (or, in cultural nationalist terms, “alien” aspirations, affects, ideas, images and impulses) that have the capacity to self-replicate and eventually take over the national body, Bashford rightly observes that “Quarantine and nationalism imply each other because both are about the creation of spaces. Through the administration of a boundary they determine an internal and an external, nominated as clean and dirty.” (Bashford 1998, 389)

As Deana Heath, Christopher Forth and Jan Goldstein have all detailed, by the late 19th century, the discourse of “contagion” had spread beyond the physical body into the psycho-moral sphere. As Heath explains, moral contagion was originally seen as having a physical basis: “The term ‘morality’ served as a referent for a series of codes and practices around the art of government, in particular for the conduct of the individual. ‘Immorality’ thus signified practices that fostered ungovernable behaviour, such as lack of self-reliance, ignorance, dishonesty, disloyalty or sexual impropriety, all of which were deemed attributes of working-class life…Immorality, it was believed, could be absorbed into the skin through corpuscles…” (Heath 2010, 36) This early etiology of moral contagion was closely linked to the neo-Lamarckian argument that the susceptibility to moral contagion and the closely related disorder – moral degeneration – were inherited (Stern 2005). As Christopher Forth explains, the majority of those diagnosed in the mid-19th century “as having succumbed to contagious influences also suffered from hereditary degeneration, nervous disorders, or some other acquired affliction, all of which fostered a special receptivity in the person.” (Forth 2001, 63)

However, the emergence of the disciplines of psychology and psychiatry in this period reoriented the etiology of moral contagion away from physical to psychological factors. The discovery of hypnotic suggestion and the recognition that so-called “normal” and “healthy” individuals were as susceptible to its effects as “degenerates” created widespread anxiety among those who envisaged the development of a “rational” moral order in western societies (Goldstein 1984; Bartholomew 1990; Forth 2001; Falconer 2002). It also created renewed anxieties over the future of masculinity in the modern world. As Forth explain, medical concerns over suggestibility focussed almost exclusively on men because, at the time, it was assumed that women and children were always already at the whims of their passions and open to “penetration” by external influences. Men, on the other hand, possessed willpower—the power to control their passions and to police their psychic borders so as to ward off the penetrative powers of external pressures and seductions. It was this identification of masculinity with willpower that made the possibility of moral contagion through suggestibility so threatening: “The ideal man constructed in these medical discourses was one capable of sustaining his mental autonomy through sheer willpower. Men who succumbed to moral contagion therefore exempted themselves from the ranks of such men to take their place alongside women and children…” (Forth 2001, 69)
These concerns about suggestibility and moral contagion were exacerbated by the rise of what we now call the “mass media” in the late Victorian period. Growing literacy levels created a burgeoning market for the mass press, dime novels, crime fiction, comic books, pornography and romance novels and many of the consumers of these new cultural products were the groups who were seen to be the most susceptible to suggestion—women, children, working-class, immigrant, and indigenous men. The mass media was seen as a conduit for moral contagion for three reasons: 1) it could reach far larger numbers than word of mouth; 2) it has the capacity to vividly narrate or visually represent criminal, seditious or sexually transgressive activities that “could generate powerful nervous sensations” in its audiences; 3) its powers of suggestion caused vulnerable populations to identify with and imitate criminals, traitors and deviants (Goldstein 1984). Anne-Marie Kinahan nicely describes the latter anxiety in her account of 19th century campaigns in Canada against the dime novel. The powers of suggestion of these cultural products, it was believed, “were even more persuasive on the impressionable and ill-formed minds of children, who “are either stimulated to admire and imitate high and noble characters, or they are weakened and dwarfed by the bad example of the people set before them and who have been absorbing their attention”.

Since novels had an unquestionable influence, both for good and evil, the careful cultivation of good taste was an important prophylactic against the potentially “dangerous seed” of impure literature.” (Kinahan 2007, 165; see also Adams 1995, Heath 2010).

As Kinahan’s language of “prophylactic” suggests, public health initiatives provided those who wanted to protect the nation from moral contagion with both models for intervention and with a language with which to “capture” this emerging threat to the nation. As Heath, Falconer and Kinahan all describe, the conjunction of this new biopolitical discourse of moral contagion, degeneration and hygiene and the emergence of a global trade in cultural products led to the creation of a new legal and governmental apparatus designed to quarantine “obscene” and “immoral” cultural products and facilitate the circulation of “healthy” products. Deana Heath forcefully demonstrates how that this new apparatus should be seen as part of a larger governmental project of public health:

That by the late nineteenth century regulating obscenity had become viewed as a hygienic project is clear from the language used to denote the danger of publications deemed to be obscene or simply ‘immoral’ (such as that they were a ‘moral epidemic’ or ‘a contagious disorder of soul and body’ that served to “[undermine] the sense of continence and self-control in the individual which is essential to a sound and healthy state’); in the type of material targeted for regulation (such as contraceptive and sexology literature and advertisements); in the agencies responsible for carrying out such regulation (such as health agencies and customs departments, which drew upon their powers of detention and quarantine to keep ‘unhealthy’ literature outside of the geographic boundaries of the nation-state); and in the means to regulate it (such as the need for a censorship system that functioned in the nature of a ‘sanitary system’ or, as one proponent described it, as a ‘quarantine to prevent plagues which would interfere with the moral health of the people’) (Heath 2010, 86-7).

While much of the research on cultural contagion focuses on the mid- to late 19th century, Emily Martin demonstrates in “Towards an Anthropology of Immunology: the Body as a Nation-State” how the hygienic strategy of quarantine was supplemented by
notions of vaccination and inoculation by the early 20th century. According to Martin, models of the immune system are overcoded by the militaristic trope of the body as a police state in which surveillance and memory play a central role in warding off threats. As Martin explains, each “native” cell carries in it a special arrangement of proteins described as “identity papers” or a “common language” that allows other “native” cells to recognize it as one of their own. Cells that lack this protein strand are identified as invaders, attacked and destroyed. Furthermore, T cells are able to archive the characteristics of those invading cells for years so that “the intruders’ descriptions are stored in the vast criminal records of the immune system. When a substance matching one of the stored descriptions makes a new appearance, the memory cells see to the swift manufacture of antibodies to combat it.” (quoted in Martin, 1990: 412).

The Canadian Memory-Crisis

What is significant for our purposes about this description of the immune system is that it closely matches the now-dominant Canadian discourse about the relationship between memory, the capacity for self-recognition and the “problem” of Canadian identity in light of the omnipresent threat of American penetration and contagion. Beginning in the late 1980s, many prominent Canadians have argued in a medicalized language that strongly evokes the discourse of moral contagion, degeneracy and suggestibility that many of the threats to Canadian culture could be traced back to a lack of collective memory. For example, Mark Starowicz, the head of the CBC’s documentary division, has argued that “There is a crisis in the transmission of our society's memory. In fact, there is no real memory. Canadian society has had a stroke that has virtually eliminated long-term memory, leaving us with flickering short-term memory, our emotions buffeted by a sound bite, bewildered by a film clip, stamped by a phone-in show or a pundit’s column... We in Canada have not only impaired the links to the past, we have impaired and severed the arteries that connect us in the present.” (Starowicz 1999: n.p.)

According to many, this “stroke” or, more commonly, “national amnesia” has occurred due to the omnipresence of American cultural products in Canada. As Jack Granatstein has sardonically noted: “The ordinary Canadian citizen, inundated by American media and Fourth-of-July rah-rah patriotism, scarcely knows that Canada has a past.” (Granatstein 1998, 4) For his part, Starowicz argues for a more complexity causality. As his metaphor of “arteries” suggests, he argues that the perennial Canadian problem of living in a country whose airwaves are saturated by American media has been compounded since the 1980s by cutbacks to public broadcasting, the proliferation of specialty cable channels and the rise of the Internet. The result, he argues, is that the “arteries” such as the CBC which once connected Canadians together in a shared “public space” have now been severed or fragmented. He then offers what can only be called a therapeutic intervention designed to “save” the Canadian body politic: “The antidote to an ever fragmenting information spectrum is context and history...” (Starowicz 1999: n.p.)

Underpinning this discourse of “the Canadian memory-crisis” (Hodgins 2004) is the assumption that a shared collective memory is the wellspring of a strong and vigorous national identity. As Emily West has argued, this discourse endows Canadian public or collective memory with a quasi-magical character as a “heal-all” that will serve both as a prophylactic against the seductions of American culture and as a suture that will stitch together all of the tears in the national fabric (West 2006). However, this optimism about the heal-all powers of national memory is offset by the anxiety that
the Canadian audience (especially the suggestible youth upon whom the future of the nation depends) has been fully drawn into the American interpretive community and has thus lost its sense of own distinct heritage and identity. In order to (re)introduce young Canadians to their own cultural heritage, a predictable solution is often offered: make Canadian history “more exciting” for young Canadians. Many argue that the only way to reach young Canadians is through the codes of American media culture. In other words, recent attempts at popularizing Canadian history operate with a grounding assumption that in order to attract and entertain young viewers, Canadian history must be narrated using Hollywood codes, conventions, plots and genres and that their success in provoking Canadian pleasure will be directly linked to how closely they approximate Hollywood standards of “excitement” and “significance”.

Such cultural interventions are clearly designed, in the first instance, as therapeutic measures. Assuming that the Canadian “bodily politic” is at risk due to the “penetration” of American culture, that that “penetration” has “severed” the “arteries” between the Canadian past and its present, productions like the Heritage Minutes and Canada: a People’s History were designed as therapeutic interventions that would “reconnect” Canadians with their past. In the second instance, they were probably also designed to provide their audiences with a certain immunity to the future seductions of American culture and, more specifically American television. Two of the defenders of the Heritage Minutes makes their immunological character clear when they argue that they represent an attempt to “fight fire with fire—trying to win back a measure of our lost Canadian identity using the [media] most responsible for its loss.” (Logan and Waxman 1998, 2). In other words, the use of Hollywood media, codes and genres seems to be intended to act as a kind of inoculation. As Roland Barthes famously explained, when one “immunizes the contents of the collective imagination by means of a small inoculation of acknowledged evil, one thus protects it against the risk of a generalized subversion” (Barthes 1957, 150).

New Strategies for Building Cultural Health

This strategy of using parts of American culture to “heal” Canadian culture marks an important shift from the Canadian national(ist) pedagogical strategies which prevailed for much of the 20th century. As Charles Acland and many other Canadian film historians have pointed out, these traditional strategies emerged as a response to the curious political economic history of the North American audiovisual market in which Canada was successfully claimed by Hollywood as part of the American domestic film market and Canadian television networks rely heavily for revenue on the broadcasting of American shows (cf. Harcourt 1978; Magder 1993; Acland 2001). Acland argues that the American domination of the Canadian film distribution and exhibition circuit “is perhaps the single most influential factor in the idea of cultural absence in Canadian film…domestic film is largely missing from traditional commercial exhibition channels; it occupies only 2 to 3 percent of the theatrical market.” (Acland 2001, 276) Because of this political economic history, if Canadians were likely to see Canadian films at all, it was generally “in parallel locations—the school, the film festival or retrospective, the exposition, the community hall, the library, the museum” (Acland 2001, 286).

Given the institutional nature of these sites of Canadian film-viewing, it is not surprising that, for many, the experience of Canadian film viewing has generally been associated with a pedagogical mode of address in which the preferred assigned subject position for the audience was that of
the student. As we have seen, this pedagogically inflected experience of Canadian film has historically been reinforced by a Canadian cultural policy discourse that recurrently infantilizes Canadian audiences by portraying Hollywood as a Svengali who leads suggestible Canadians astray through the appeal to their “irrational” desires and appetites (Atwood 1972; Berland 1995; Longfellow 1998; for more general discussions of the gendered and infantilizing nature of the critique of mass culture upon which the Canadian critique draws, cf. Huysssen 1986; Petro 1986; Bignell 2002).

Given that Canadian cultural nationalist discourse/cultural policy discourse typically constructs commercial or popular cinema as an alien cultural contagion, it is not surprising that Canadian forays into popular film have been generally, as Acland reports, “treated disparagingly and rejected by critics.” (Acland 2001, 286). Instead, that discourse privileges, in a minor way, art cinema and more importantly, documentary cinema produced by publically funded institutions. Driven by the codes of what Zoe Druick nicely calls “government realism” (Druick 2007)—the realistic portrayal of “ordinary Canadians” who serve as allegories for the challenges, struggles and triumphs of the Canadian nation, documentary films produced by institutions like the National Film Board and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation carry within them an immunological or prophylactic logic. Beginning with the premise that the infantilization and feminization of the Canadian body politic has occurred due to unprotected exposure to Hollywood film and television, government realist films and public service media are constructed as “healthy” anticolonial pedagogical technologies that can inoculate the nation against the most nefarious effects of Hollywood by showing the daily lives of “real” Canadians.

More specifically, however, it is hoped that the government realist film will act as a technology of self-knowledge that will better allow the members of the nation to distinguish between self and non-self. Without such state interventions into the public sphere, it is argued that Canada will be incapable of defending itself against future American penetration and contagion because it will lack the ability to develop an active, effective and autonomous national culture. In order to do the latter, it is argued, Canadians need their own media system that can fulfill “the task of mirroring the nation, a mirroring that presumably leads eventually to better images, as those looking at themselves begin to practice self-help...[This] is a discourse of self-awareness and self-improvement that anthropomorphizes and unifies the nation, deploying the search of the subject to know its own body and mind in a teleological manner that glides towards the apotheosis of competent adulthood.” (Miller 1993, 119) Without such a mirror that allows it to recognize itself, the nation lacks both the sense of where it begins and where it ends as well as the adult and masculine will and ability to defend that heritage.

In this paper, I’m emphasizing the rhetorical character of cultural nationalist discourse. In all fairness, however, this belief that the lack of a national technology of self-recognition will weaken the national capacity to know and protect its boundaries has many defenders in the scholarly world. For example, in The Past Within Us: media, memory, history, Tessa Morris-Suzuki argues that film shares with television a high capacity to create audience identifications but a low capacity to reveal the argumentative, interpretative and evidentiary processes by which people and events come to be represented. This is due to three basic characteristics of popular film and television narrative. The first is the tendency to use stock characters to simplify and personalize a complex and contradictory social reality. Secondly, the narrative is pared down to clear lines of action that the audience can easily follow. Thirdly, audiences are further
‘helped out’ by reframing events using familiar myths and narrative frameworks. Given that TV relies so heavily on narrative frameworks and stereotypes, it simultaneously produces two types of audience identifications: one with the characters on-screen and the other with the interpretive community whose commonsensical myths and stereotypes the text draws upon and reaffirms (Morris-Suzuki 2005).

If we believe English Canadian nationalists, a major impediment to the Canadian nation-building project is that when Canadian film and television audiences “read” a given audiovisual text, they are decoding it using American myths and stereotypes in order to identify with American characters. In other words, both at the level of encoding and decoding, they are being drawn into the American interpretive community and the lines between self and non-self are continuously blurred. This situation is exacerbated by fact that, as we have already seen, the English-Canadian media market has almost always been saturated by imported American cultural products. As a result, English-Canadian nationalists lament that much of what Canadians know about Mounties or French-Canadian fur traders comes from American TV and movies (Berton 1975).

Repatriating Canadian National Memory: the Heritage Minutes

This perennial fear of Hollywood-induced misrecognition and the belief that Canadians need to develop their own mechanisms for self-recognition has stimulated many notable attempts, over the past decade and a half, to harness the power of TV and film to create a revived Canadian public memory. However, for the purposes of this paper, I want to talk only about one of the first and most prominent of these memory projects: the Heritage Minutes. The Heritage Minutes are 60 second historical vignettes/commercials about heroes from the Canadian past that have aired since the early 1990s. Credited with having the high production values typically associated with Hollywood films, the Minutes seek to make Canadian history digestible to what is constructed as an anomic and easily distracted audience by means of formulaic plotlines, the reduction of historical personages to recognizable stock characters, an unapologetically celebratory tone and subtle and overt acts of national interpellation. In an interview, Patrick Watson, their creative director, makes no attempt to hide their promotional intent. He relates that they were inspired by the idea that “If we can use 30 second or 1 minute slots on television to persuade people that Corn Flakes or underarm deodorant or Cadillacs are interesting, could we not use the same period on television to persuade Canadians that they have an interesting past?” (Heritage Project 1998).

The promotional and repetitive character of the Minutes is probably, more than anything else, what gives them their power. One of the necessary conditions for the construction of cultural identities is the possession of the economic and institutional power to repeat as often as possible to as large an audience as possible that “you are one of us.” (Billig 1995; Althusser 1998). As we have already seen, the power of the Canadian nationalist apparatus to do so has historically been limited by the fact that the English-Canadian media market has been saturated by imported American cultural products. While most of the scholarship of the Heritage Minute have criticized their hegemonic politics and their presentist, exclusionary and revisionist reading of the Canadian past (cf. Longfellow 1998; Stanley 2000; Neatby 2001; Rukszto 2002; Hodgins, 2003; West 2006; Rukszto 2008), it is hard not to be filled with a certain amount of grudging admiration for their tactical cleverness. As Michel de Certeau argued, strategy is the prerogative of the powerful who structure the networks and space-time
paths the rest of us who must negotiate through the use of tactics—the devious art of exploiting gaps in the system to create one’s own space (de Certeau 1998).

The Heritage Minutes were originally designed to take advantage of the spatio-temporal gaps in the Hollywood audiovisual imperium to recreate Canadian memory, place and identity. One important front in this war of position is Canadian movie theatres where they often appear as trailers before the typically American film. Another front is Canadian TV where they are frequently shown in the interstices between Survivor: Africa and Family Guy, Simpsons and Seinfeld repeats. On both of these fronts, the Minutes seek to turn the seemingly insatiable Canadian appetite for Hollywood programming and the political economic peculiarities of the Canadian media system to its advantage. Rather than lamenting the omnipresence of Hollywood, they use its lures to re-Canadianize audiences.

Furthermore, the Heritage Minutes are also frequently shown in non-commercial venues. The most obvious and most important venue is the classroom. While they were originally produced by a philanthropic organization known as the CRB Foundation (funded primarily by the Bronfman family—the owners of Seagram’s, MCA and Universal Studios) and mainly intended for screening in theatres and on television, they later became the centerpieces of a much larger memory-project known as the Historica Foundation. Funded by many of Canada’s largest corporations, the Historica Foundation has created a website (www.histori.ca) which makes all of the 60+ Heritage Minutes available but also provides teachers with accompanying lesson plans and games and links to other sites. Furthermore, Historica also promotes what it calls “Heritage Fairs” for schoolchildren. These are aimed at encouraging students to use the narrative codes and framework to create their own Heritage Minutes as well as professional development activities for teachers (cf. www.histori.ca).

In their quest to use a public educational system to disseminate the message of the Minutes, the propagandizing aims of Historica reach far beyond those of the original Heritage Project. While the latter was content to sneak into the gaps between American films and TV shows to remind Canadians of their identity and heritage, the former seeks to use what is almost certainly still the most powerful ideological state apparatus—the school. As Gerald Miller has noted, changing existing identities, beliefs and responses is incredibly difficult, time-consuming and expensive. This is the case because new messages, products or identities are always checked against an often complex and contradictory welter of sedimented commonsense, cultural memories of previous attempts at persuasion and “truths” repeated and reinforced by powerful social and cultural institutions. In the case of someone who already has beliefs on a given subject, the best one can generally hope for is to remind them of their identity and those beliefs (Miller 2002).

However, constructing someone’s identity, beliefs and structure of responses to the some part of the world from scratch is a much more efficient and long-lasting form of persuasion. This is what makes the shift from the Heritage Minutes as audiovisual reminders of identity and belief to the enlistment of schools, teachers and students in the dissemination and production of these memory-texts so Althusserian. Not only does it enlist all of the disciplinary and normalizing powers of the school to familiarize Canadian students with Canadian heroes and myths, it seeks to literally in-form Canadian students with the narrative frameworks and codes of the Heritage Minutes. Through the offer of a much more exciting alternative to everyday classroom activities, Canadian students will take on codes and frames of the Heritage Minutes as the lenses through which they understand and articulate the world and their place in it.
The Immunologic of the Heritage Minutes

In a self-produced documentary titled Minute by Minute: the Making of a Mythology (1998), some of the chief architects use the language of myth to describe what I’m calling the “immunologic” of the Heritage Minutes. Contrary to his pious pronouncements on the sacrosanct nature of history made earlier in the interview, Patrick Watson, the creative director of the Minutes, makes the surprising assertion that the Heritage Minutes are not about “history” at all. As he explains: “We’re not really doing documentaries here, we’re making myths. That’s what movies are, they’re myths and this country needs a mythology of its history before it can go and get motivated to go study its documentary history” (Heritage Project 1998). As Watson puts it, the goal of the Minutes is not to inform and educate Canadian citizens but to construct a Canadian nationalist interpretive schema. Furthermore, he implies that once this schema becomes the filter through which young Canadians view their past, it will inoculate their viewers against competing identity narratives.

In this way, the Heritage Minutes can be read as an attempt to create a cultural border between Canada and the United States by providing their audiences with oppositional cultural memories and strategies of reading. In this way, they seem to draw upon some of the theoretical insights that emerged with the rise of ethnographic audience studies in the 1980s. More specifically, they seemed to be inspired by some of the scholars who investigated the conditions of the possibility of producing what Stuart Hall famously termed “oppositional readings” of mainstream texts (Hall 2001). For example, as is the case with the Heritage Project, Jacqueline Bobo’s work on the decoding strategies of black women stresses the importance of cultural memories of misrepresentation or invisibility in mainsteam texts and the circulation of counter-narratives and images through alternative cultural conduits for the production of oppositional readings. Because they can draw on such memories and counter-narratives and images, members of subordinate groups can immunize themselves against the ideological power of such texts. As Bobo, this pre-existing archive of memories and counter-narratives allows them to “ferret out the beneficial and put up blinders against the rest…[and] bring other viewpoints to bear on the watching of the film, and may see things other than what the film-makers intended.” (Bobo 2004, 181)

In the case of the Heritage Minutes, this construction of semi-permeable hermeneutic borders is reinforced and doubled by explicit narratives about contests over the Canadian-American border. “Sitting Bull”, for example, is set on the Saskatchewan-Montana border in 1877 and begins with an aerial long-shot as we see a long cordon of American soldiers flanked by a handful of Mounties. As the camera pans into the head of the cordon, we hear a voice with an American accent ask: “Hey, Mr. McLeod, where are the rest of your men?”. A bearded Mountie then responds in a thick Scottish brogue: “You’ve got more men back there than I have in the whole of western Canada.” The American General riding beside him then replies: “Yeah, but Sitting Bull held a war dance last night.” Finally, McLeod responds: “General Terry, Sitting Bull has kept the Queen’s peace. He’s agreed to meet with you” (Heritage Project 1998).

Right away, we can see how this Minute is founded on one of English Canada’s central myths: the myth of the peaceful settlement of the Canadian west. As Eva Mackey argues in The House of Difference, this myth figured the RCMP as bringing peace, order and good government to a previously lawless land and the native peoples as grateful, “child-like, trusting and ultimately friendly to their Canadian
government invaders” (Mackey 1999, 35). This myth of the “grateful Indian”, she argues, was then deployed by Canadian nationalists to figure themselves as distinct and morally superior to Americans because it “allowed Canadians to nurture a sense of themselves as a just people, unlike the Americans south of the border who were waging a war of extermination against their Indian population” (Francis quoted in Mackey 1999, 35). This continuous comparison between Canadian and American strategies explains why so much emphasis is placed upon the relative size of their American and the Canadian contingent in this Minute. It seeks to reaffirm the Canadian faith in “soft power” as opposed to uncivilized America’s use of violence. This message is then reiterated by McLeod’s expression of his confidence that Sitting Bull will keep the “Queen’s Peace”.

As in most ads, the Minutes make extensive use of message redundancy. “Sitting Bull” is a particularly obvious example of this rhetorical strategy. After we are introduced to our two main terms of comparison—Colonel McLeod of the Mounties and General Terry of the U.S. Army, our third major player is introduced: Sitting Bull. As the action shifts indoors, the camera pans across the room filled with Canadian, American and native dignitaries and rests momentarily on Terry. We hear a door open and attention shifts to Sitting Bull who has just entered. Terry then says to him: “President Hayes says you will be received kindly and…”. He is then cut off by Sitting Bull who replies: “The Grandmother’s medicine house is no place for lies. Not two more words. This country does not belong to you. We will stay here and keep the Grandmother’s peace. She will let us raise our children. We do not want lies. These men, Walsh and McLeod, they’re the first white men who have never lied to us.” Sitting Bull then turns his back on the American general and walks over to the two Mounties and shakes their hands.

If the Minute ended here, it would present the critic of the mythologization of history with an opportunity to engage in the proverbial “shooting fish in the barrel”. Here we have a less than subtle attack on the Hollywood celebration of the Wild West and imperialist ideologies of “manifest destiny” via the juxtaposition of genocidal American barbarism with Canadian civility. However, it continues. As we watch Sitting Bull shake hands with Walsh and McLeod, the latter confesses in a voice-over that “I didn’t know then that they would be starved out of Canada and go back to the States. Walsh would resign over it and Sitting Bull would be murdered.” (Heritage Project, 1998). By introducing this new information, the comedy of “Sitting Bull” is transformed into a tragedy.

Even though it indexes the tragic history of the brutal and even genocidal “Indian policies” of both Canadian and American governments, “Sitting Bull” still tries to preserve the myth of the just Mountie and the bloodthirsty Yank in three ways. First, we are told by McLeod that he was unaware that Sitting Bull and the Sioux were to be starved out of Canada. This flies straight in the face of the documentary evidence. In a letter written by McLeod in the immediate aftermath of this failed parley, he reports that “I pointed out to them [the Sioux] that their only hope was the buffalo, that it would cease, and that they could expect nothing whatever from the Queen’s government” (quoted in MacEwan 1973, 132, my italics). Furthermore, Walsh left the West and returned to his family home near Ottawa not out of disgust but as a result of poor health (MacEwan 1973). Finally, we are told by the Minute that Sitting Bull was “murdered” as a result of his repatriation in 1881. While it is true that Sitting Bull died in a gunfight with the American Indian Police, his death did not occur until 1890 during a gunfight between the American Indian Police and the members of a messianic cult to which he belonged (MacEwen 1973). Given that he “died with his boots on”, the use of the term “murder” to describe his death is a rhetorical
sleight of hand designed to keep alive the good Mountie/bloodthirsty Yank dualism.

In “Sam Steele”, the figure of the Mountie is deployed once again as a means of producing Canadian identity by marshaling Canadian cultural differences from the all-too-similar Americans. While “Sitting Bull” suggests that the Canadian-American border acts as a cordon sanitaire from American racism and injustice, “Sam Steele” tries to enforce the line between Americans and Canadians in a more obvious manner. It is set on the Alaska/Canada border in 1898 and begins with a lone prospector with a heavy American accent muttering to himself. The scene then cuts to the interior of a log cabin where the prospector sits at a table facing a stern Mountie. After the prospector reveals his plan to go to the Klondike, the seated Mountie tells him that he cannot wear pistols and bring gambling gear into Canada. The prospector then draws his gun and points it at the seated Mountie and shouts: “I’m an American, you can’t do this to me!”. The Mountie remains ice-calm and replies: “In that case, I’ll be lenient. We’ll keep the gambling gear and you’ll be back in the United States by sundown.” In the final scene, we watch as the prospector is escorted back across the border while muttering to himself: “Why didn’t I shoot him?” (Heritage Project 1998).

This Minute falls within a long Canadian tradition of favourably comparing our national personality with that of the Americans (New 1998). In the Canadian nationalist imaginary, the so-called “average American” has the characteristics of our Yankee prospector: cowardly, self-aggrandizing, bombastic, individualistic and violence-prone. The seated Mountie, on the other hand, represents the heroic virtues that this imaginary holds dear: bravery, calm, rationality and the commitment to the protection of peace, order and good government. Such comparisons, Anna Makolkin argues, act as “sign systems controlling group behaviour” (Makolkin 1992). In other words, by ending the Minute with a scene of the boisterous Yankee being led back to the border, this Minute acts as both a celebration of so-called “Canadian values” and as a prescription for future actions: like our heroic Mountie, Canadians should expel Americanism, individualism, racism, greed, violence and ignorance from the Canadian body politic.

“Sitting Bull” and “Sam Steele” are among several Heritage Minutes that seek to immunize Canadians through the assertion of prophylactic physical and cultural borders that allegedly distinguish them from the Americans. While these Minutes emphasize the impenetrability of the Canadian border, other Minutes reveal it to be a semipermeable membrane. “Underground Railroad”, for example, begins with a shot of a young black woman anxiously peering out a church window. She then begins to shout in a panicked voice: “They should have been here by now. He’s three hours late already. Paw ain’t gonna make it. One of them slave catchers caught him…” As she continues to panic, a white woman emerges from the background and rushes over to calm the young woman by physically restraining her and telling her that: “Liza, you both [nodding towards a young black man standing in the background] made it past the border yesterday. We’ve done this before.” She then tries to lead the young woman towards a pew in order to pray. The young black woman, however, breaks free and runs out into the street and the white woman follows. After a few seconds, they both come to a halt and the white woman gives a knowing smile. The camera then shows a wagon laden with church pews. Liza is then calmly led back to the church where we watch as the bottom is removed from one pew. As this occurs, a voiceover tells us that “Between 1840 and 1860, more than 30000 American slaves came secretly to Canada and freedom.”. When the pew is opened, an older black man crawls out and embraces Liza and her brother. As they celebrate their reunion, the father shouts “We’re free!” and
Liza responds: “Yes, Paw. We’re in Canada” (Heritage Project 1998).

The myth of the Underground Railroad has always been cherished as an important index of Canadian moral superiority vis-à-vis the Americans. In this myth, the Canadian border acts as a refuge from American racism. However, as with all myths, its rhetorical power is based as much on its silences as on its historical reality. While it is true that many escaped American slaves did take refuge in Canada in this period, they were hardly accepted with open arms. As Douglas Francis et al. detail in Origins: Canadian History to Confederation, most of the escaped slaves returned to the United States “after the passage of the Emancipation Act of 1863, having found temporary refuge, but no more tolerance than they had experienced in the United States” (Francis et al. 1988, 283). Furthermore, this myth also suggests that slavery was a solely American problem. This is also untrue. From the earliest periods of settlement until the late 18th century, blacks were employed as slaves for white settlers in Canada. When slavery was finally abolished in the late 18th century, the rationale was as much economic as it was moral (Francis et al. 1988: 202).

All of these historical details about the experience of blacks and other minority groups in Canada are left in the shadows by this and other Minutes because they are not really about their experience. It is almost inevitable that when a clearly marked member of a minority group shows up in one of the Minutes, they are almost always represented as passive victims of racism who have been saved by the agency of white Canada. In other words, in spite of the fact that they suggest that they are inclusive of subaltern memory, these Minutes constantly reaffirm the centrality of white heroes to the Canadian national narrative (Hodgins 2003).

We see this in the implicit comparison between Liza and the white woman. From the beginning, Liza is portrayed in true colonialist fashion as incapable of policing herself—she shouts, she panics, she seems to have little control over her bodily impulses. The white woman, on the other hand, represents the “civilized” self. Her words are careful and her movements are controlled. Like the missionary, she takes it upon the “white (wo)man’s burden” of settling Liza by physically restraining her, leading her to the pew and verbally reassuring her that the superior self-control of the white Canadians will keep their secret safe. When the child-like Liza initially rejects her reassurances and bursts out into the street, we then see her get her epistemic comeuppance as the wagon pulls into view and the knowing smile flashes across the white woman’s face. With the superior moral and intellectual qualities of white Canada thus reaffirmed, we are then treated to a celebration of the glorious justice of Canada under its wise white leadership.

In some of the other Minutes, the traditional Canadian image of the Canadian body politic being penetrated by American popular culture is reversed so that the more salubrious aspects of the latter are represented as being secretly Canadian. In other words, rather than being a vector of Americanization, popular culture becomes a vector of Canadianization. As Frank Manning has argued, Canadian artists have become masters at taking American popular culture, Canadianizing it and then selling it back to Americans (Manning 1993). For Canadians, this produces two types of pleasure. First of all, American recognition is often necessary to reassure Canadians of their own distinct existence and global importance. As a result, it is never enough for English Canadians that they identify a given individual as a hero, true satisfaction only comes when the colonial master recognizes her as a hero (Keohane 1997). Another frisson is produced through the construction of Canada in which while it is accepted that it might be economically and militarily weaker, its intellectual and moral superiority is reaffirmed. For many
Canadians, the omnipresence of Canadians in Hollywood in itself is a source of tremendous nationalist pride. Furthermore, once you throw in the perception that most Americans are more than likely unaware of that fact, the pleasure doubles because it reaffirms the ressentiment-laced Canadian construction of themselves as creative, knowledgeable and cosmopolitan and Americans as unimaginative, ignorant and narcissistic (on anti-Americanism and Canadian ressentiment, cf. Dorland 1998, Wilmott 2001; Hodgins in press).

We see this dynamic at work in the Minute titled “Superman”. It begins with a young man and a slightly older woman walking along the siding of a train station. A caption tells us that this scene in set in Cleveland in 1931. As they walk, he says in an excited tone: “…And he can lift anything, anything at all. He’s that strong, Lois.” As he continues, he describes a superhero who poses as a mild-mannered reporter but who has a secret identity as a crime fighter. As he speaks, his companion (identified as Lois) reacts superciliously by saying things like “Honestly, you Canadian kids…” or “No one is going to read a comic book about a superhero in tights, it’ll never fly.” The young man then gets onboard a train. As it’s pulling out, he hands Lois a folded piece of paper through the window. When she unfolds it, we see a pencil sketch of the now familiar character of Superman. Significantly, another caption appears over the sketch: “A Part of Our Heritage”. This caption seems to be addressed primarily to Canadian audiences in that it interpellates them, in Tim Stanley’s words, “to see themselves as connected to the chief protagonists of the video, extending this connection from the “our” of the viewers, the film makers and the broadcasters, back in time” (Stanley, in press). In this case, however, the “our” is as much a gesture of exclusion as inclusion. To stamp Superman as “ours” is to claim that the best parts of American popular culture have actually been invented by Canadians. While the Americans might be too narcissistic and ignorant to know that these things are really Canadian, the “we” of “our heritage” knows better.

Conclusion

I began this essay by outlining a longstanding Canadian discourse the frames the Canadian nation as a body that is constantly subject to American penetration and contagion. I then argued that one of the consequences of figuring the Canadian nation in this manner is that the discourse of public health and its strategies of interventions into the everyday lives of Canadians is taken up into Canadian cultural policy discourse in sometimes subtle and, at other times, overt ways. In the case of the Heritage Minutes, this interpenetration of cultural and public health discourse gives them a “governmental” character which equates the creation of a semipermeable cultural membrane between Canada and the United States with a form of cultural hygiene that will produce a “healthy” and “vigourous” Canada. However, it is not clear how successful they have been in this mission. Their solemn piety has been recurrently parodied in Canadian popular culture (Rukszto 2005), dismissed as propaganda by Canadian journalists (LeDoyen 1998; Pétrowski 2000; Lester 2001; Webster 2002), and are typically described by the young and media-savvy as artless and embarrassing residues of a waning WASPish cultural nationalism (cf. Glenn @ soapboxfrequent.blogspot.com 2008).

While the nationalists would likely see such responses as further proof of the need to protect Canadians against the Hollywood contagion, that alleged “contagion” and the way in which it has constantly reminded Canadians of the existence of the world beyond their borders might well have strengthened Canadian culture. In other words, Hollywood might well have inoculated English Canada against
what Gianni Vattimo has described as cultural nationalism’s “deep-seated nostalgia for the reassuring yet menacing closure of horizons” (Vattimo 1992). Our full exposure to the gales of the global cultural economy constantly reminds Canadians of the ephemerality of closure and the contingency of “home”. More importantly, if we follow the logic of immunology, perhaps we’ve also learned that exposure to a few bugs and a little dirt makes the national body stronger.

WORKS CITED


Starowicz, Mark. 1999. “A nation without memory. Deserted by their own broadcast system, bombarded by American television, Canadians are so cut off from each other and the country's past that they seem to have suffered a catastrophic stroke. The executive producer of CBC's massive Canadian History Project is working on a cure.” Globe and Mail February 6, 1999.


