DEMOGRAPHICS AND CULTURAL CONSUMPTION

Interview with Minelle Mahtani

How do you define Canadian Culture? How would you assess the state of Canadian culture? In what ways has the growing diversity in the composition of Canada changed the definition of Canadian culture?

Canadian culture remains difficult to define primarily because it is continually morphing and changing shape. It is an amorphous concept, rife with ambiguity, ambivalence, irony and contradictions. Some have jokingly referred to Canadian culture as an oxymoron, but I don't see it that way. In fact, I believe that it is the very nebulous nature of Canadian culture in which its strengths lie. Canadian culture includes, but is not limited to, the wide array of representations produced to comment on our multi-faceted relationship to the nation-state, from the local to the municipal to the provincial levels, through images, texts and productions that explore the nexus between home, nation and identity. It is high-brow, and low-brow culture; ranging from the chalk drawings of children on the sidewalk to graffiti on abandoned buildings to the glitzy, multi-media shows at the Canadian Opera Company. Canadian diversity in all its forms – particularly demographically – has strongly influenced the blossoming of new forms of Canadian culture. For example, the growing population of "mixed race" people in this country has allowed for a metissage – or mixing – of cultural representations to emerge in the social landscape, where we are witnessing more postmodern, playful and parodic representations of what it means to be a "mixed race" Canadian – exemplified through films like "Domino" that both celebrate and critically examine the "mixed race" experience.

Has Canadian culture successfully responded to the challenge of the diversification of Canada's population?

Yes – and no. I think individual artists scattered across the country do a remarkable job on commenting in insightful and innovative ways about the complicated relationship between culture and nation, and here I am not just thinking of quintessentially Canadian artists like director Atom Egoyan or musicians like the Tragically Hip, but I am also referring to less mainstream artists – individuals like Piers Johnson (see www.piersjohnson.ca) who offer complex commentaries on Canadian identity by juxtaposing paintings of Canadian icons against sections of maps, providing a "nest" for various forms of mixed media, images and text and successfully challenging how we think about borders, boundaries and cartographies more broadly. It is our mainstream media organizations and institutions who support them – Telefilm, the National Film Board, the CRTC etc – who can more successfully respond to the needs of our rapidly changing population by focusing on the fact that our audience is no longer monolithic and that there is an appetite for new forms of representation on our cultural landscape. This is where we have much work to do.

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What are the particular areas in which cultural expression is strongest in the country and where do you think that it is weakest? In the areas of weakness, what do you think needs to be done to improve things? Who should take the lead role in promoting the growth and development of Canadian culture?

I don't envision this as one particular group's responsibility – rather, it becomes a challenge for all of us in the policy sector, those of us in the ivory tower and those who work to produce media images to work together to consider and develop viable economic strategies to promote new representations of what it means to be Canadian in this country. This way, more and more Canadians will see their own experiences reflected. Unfortunately, minorities are rarely invited into to contribute to the mainstream discourse of Canadian mainstream culture. When they are, they are seen as wholly representative of their entire group and often used as window-dressing as a exemplary token. We need to diversify our images and representations.

How can the Government of Canada best support the efforts of organizations that contribute to culture?

I would recommend a focus on diversifying the production of capital-c "Canadian Culture" in all its myriad forms by funding a larger range of artists. We need to give these artists greater access to both resources and social networks. We need to consider the role of mentoring. Would a formal mentoring programme for new artists be useful, where they could learn about both the creative and the business side of cultural production from those who have been successful in the past? It is important not to underestimate the role of social networks in the arena of cultural production. Moreover, as a journalism professor, I am most concerned the ways the ideology of "Canadian Culture" is represented through current-affairs documentaries produced in mainstream newsrooms across Canada. We can't think of Canadian Culture as a static concept. All mainstream media organizations in Canada are interested in stories that examine the relationship between nation, culture and society through their programming. Unfortunately, marginalized groups in Canada, including people with disabilities, immigrants and youth, among other groups, regularly witness their misrepresentation and underrepresentation in mainstream Canadian media. Yet, they have much to contribute to capital-C "Canadian Culture." It has been said that the internet provides a democratic site through which these groups can see themselves reflected. While this has indeed been a remarkably successful place for more equitable images, helping up develop a more diverse set of representations that comprise Canadian Culture, I worry that by focusing on the euphoria of the internet as a site of resistance, we take the responsibility away from mainstream media organizations to provide a mirror through which these groups can see themselves reflected. I suggest that we take a hard, long look at who is being hired in newsrooms and make serious efforts to diversify our staff, who in turn provide alternative outlooks on what it means to be Canadian.