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## The Myths That Make Us: An Examination of Canadian National Identity

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Graduate Program in Theory and Criticism  
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts  
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## **Abstract**

This thesis uses Barthes' *Mythologies* as a framework to examine the ways in which the Canadian nation has been mythologized, exploring how this mythologization affects our sense of national identity. Because, as Barthes says, the ultimate goal of myth is to transform history into nature, it is necessary to delve into Canada's past in order to understand when, why, and how it has become the nation it is today. This will involve tracing some key aspects of Canadian history, society, and pop culture from Canada's earliest days to current times to uncover the "true origins" of the naturalized, taken-for-granted elements of our identity. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate that Canada's reputation as a peaceful, tolerant, and equal-opportunity nation is a myth perpetuated to obscure longstanding power structures that serve (and have always served) the agenda of Canada's hegemonic core.

## **Keywords**

Barthes, Canada, history, multiculturalism, myth, national identity, spectacle

## **Summary for Lay Audience**

This thesis examines the many myths that have shaped Canada over time, exploring the stories, stereotypes, and symbols that we have used to represent our nation and ourselves. By tracing specific aspects of Canadian history, society, and pop culture from Canada's earliest days to current times, I attempt to uncover the "true origins" of the most taken-for-granted elements of our identity and nationhood. In doing so, I hope to challenge Canada's reputation as a peaceful, tolerant, and equal-opportunity nation by demonstrating that it is not based in fact but is rather a myth designed to draw attention away from the many issues and inequities in Canadian society.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would first like to express my appreciation for all the support provided by my co-supervisors, Dr Jan Plug and Dr Michael Gardiner; in particular, I want to thank Jan for encouraging me to write about Canada in the first place (a topic I admittedly found quite boring and unworthy of investigation, which is exactly why it ended up being such a fascinating and worthwhile area of study) and Michael for his many suggestions for resources and texts, all of which proved to be extremely useful in my research.

I want to thank the professors who taught me during my time at the Theory Centre for helping me to discover and pursue my intellectual interests that both directly and indirectly aided in my thesis writing.

I am also particularly grateful for my mom's willingness to read over many chapter drafts and both of my parents' ability to patiently and thoughtfully endure a great deal of critical commentary on Canada during dinnertime.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the contributions of my friends and peers, whose many discussions (and arguments) about Canadian identity enabled me to pinpoint the core beliefs, opinions, and ideas about Canada that I address in this project.

# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	i
<b>Summary for Lay Audience</b> .....	ii
<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	iii
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	iv
<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
Chapter Overview .....	7
<b>Chapter 1</b> Myths and Memories of Canada(?)s Past.....	12
1.1 The Mythic Mountie: A Case Study .....	14
1.2 Learning Our Lesson – Or Not.....	21
1.3 Physical Forms of Forgetting .....	27
1.4 Je Me Souviens?.....	30
<b>Chapter 2</b> Fractions, Fictions, and Frictions: Defining Differences in Canada .....	32
2.1 Breaking Away from Britain.....	35
2.2 American Animosity .....	38
2.3 “From Sea to Shining Sea”.....	45
2.4 “We” ou Non? .....	49
2.5 Divide and Conquer .....	54
2.6 Unity Through Division? .....	58
<b>Chapter 3</b> Marketing Our Myths: Symbolic and Spectacular Representations of Canada .....	60
3.1 Early Myths .....	63
3.2 Indigenizing the Nation.....	67
3.3 <i>Au Voleur!</i> Anglicizing French Canada .....	74
3.4 Marketing to a Multicultural Audience .....	77
3.5 “Stolen and Restored” .....	84

<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>91</b>
<b>Curriculum Vitae .....</b>	<b>98</b>

## Introduction

At a time when the processes of globalization are irrevocably altering people's relationships to space, time, and each other, the concept of identity has come to the forefront in many disciplines and discourses. There is a growing fear that longstanding identities, which played a central role in stabilizing the social world, have begun to dissipate as a result of what Stuart Hall calls "the shaping and reshaping of time-space relationships within different systems of representation" ("Question" 301). This has led to the proliferation of increasingly unstable and fragmented identities for modern subjects, both on an individual and collective level (274). Because of this uncertainty and instability, many people turn to the national cultures into which they are born as a primary source of identity; they take hold of the idea of their nation as not only a modern political state, but as something which provides a way of discovering, interpreting, and creating meaning: a "system of cultural representation" that serves as a blueprint for "influenc[ing] and organiz[ing] both our actions and our conception of ourselves" (292).

Echoing Benedict Anderson's definition of nations as "imagined communities," Hall conceives of the nation as a "symbolic community" and of national culture as "the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence" ("Diaspora" 237). Hall also describes national culture as a "discourse" comprised of stories, memories, and images ("Question" 292), a definition closely

analogous to Roland Barthes' notion of myth. In "Myth Today,"<sup>1</sup> Barthes identifies myth as a "type of speech" or "system of communication" (107) but also notes that myth is not limited to words, but rather can be found in "any significant unit or synthesis, whether verbal or visual" (109). For him, as well as for Hall, myth is not just the "stories [we] tell ourselves and each other about who we are as a people" (Battell Lowman and Barker 33), but also the signs and symbols that we use to represent ourselves and our nation. These myths "orient, balance, and organize the structure" (Derrida 278) which herein refers to the subject's sense of self; in the case of nationalism, such a structure enables the perpetuation of what appears to be a solid, fixed national identity for the members of this imagined community.

However, rather than merely existing or "happening" coincidentally, these stories and ideals are carefully cultivated over time, requiring the collective effort and engagement of a nation's citizens. Hall identifies five main representational strategies that are commonly employed to "construct our commonsense views of national belonging or identity":

1) the national narrative, produced and reproduced in "national histories, literatures, the media and popular culture," should solidify a specific "set of stories, images, landscapes, scenarios, historical events, national symbols, and rituals which stand for, or represent, the shared experiences, sorrows, and triumphs and disasters which give meaning to the nation" ("Question" 293);

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<sup>1</sup> This is the second section of *Mythologies*, from which I will draw most of my theoretical concepts and definitions.



- 2) there is an “emphasis on origins, continuity, tradition, and timelessness”;
- 3) traditions are invented to “inculcate certain values and norms of behaviours by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with a suitable historical past”;
- 4) there is a foundational myth<sup>2</sup> which “locates the origin of the nation, the people, and their national character so early that they are lost in the mists of, not ‘real,’ but ‘mythic’ time” (294);
- 5) this national identity should be symbolically grounded on the idea of a “pure, original people or ‘folk’” (295).

These representational strategies are responsible for creating a centre, a “point of presence, a fixed origin” (Derrida 278). It is through these methods that a seemingly-unified and unique national identity can be developed and projected, both internally upon the nation’s citizens and externally to the other nations and peoples of the world.

That national identities are intentionally constructed, as both Hall and Barthes point out, should instantly evoke suspicion. Barthes states that myth distorts particularity and obscures the absence of its own origins, allowing for the naturalization of history and the historicization of nature (142). This permits the construction of a national identity that is “ambiguously placed between past and future” so that it appears simultaneously ancient and modern, resilient and revolutionary (Hall, “Question” 295). The commonly held belief that nationhood is in some way tied to nature – something innate or intrinsic to

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<sup>2</sup> Unlike Barthes’ more inclusive and expansive use of the term, (“any significant unit or synthesis, whether verbal or visual” (109)), Hall is referring to myth in the traditional sense as origin stories or legends about a particular people.

a specific people or place – is not a result of factual historical evidence, but rather a testament to myth’s ability to give a historical intention a “natural justification,” thus making “contingency appear eternal” (Barthes 142).

Although they might be, in theory, universally applicable, Hall’s nation-building strategies are not so easily deployed in so-called “new settler societies” (such as Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and the United States) which lack the shared history that other nations use to ground their national identities and narratives. There can be no sense of “timelessness and continuity” amongst people whose arrival to a specific place can be easily traced and whose “real” origins are found on another continent.<sup>3</sup> Rather than having centuries, even millennia, of history to work with, new settler societies have been forced to “undertake the process of nation formation urgently, visibly, defensively” (Bennett et al. qtd in Mackey 22) with only a couple hundred years of history – and even fewer as globally recognized and legitimated countries – to fuel their national narratives. This is where myth becomes crucial. Because it distorts fact and obscures the absence of its own origins, it is a perfect tool for constructing and naturalizing ideas about the people, places, and events upon which nations are founded.

The nature of Canada’s international relationships and the time at which it came into being has made creating and cultivating a stable national identity especially difficult. Since Canadians do not share a unified place or ethnicity of origin (Hall’s second and fifth elements of narrative-creation), more emphasis has fallen on disseminating the

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<sup>3</sup> Although, as I will argue later, this is precisely what the troubling claims to and claiming of Indigeneity in new settler societies attempt to do.

“stories, images, landscapes, scenarios, historical events, national symbols, and rituals” representing “the shared experiences, sorrows, and triumphs and disasters which give meaning to the nation” (Hall, “Question” 293); on invoking invented traditions; and on perpetuating a foundational myth that overcomes the objective “newness” of Canada’s nationhood by shrouding “the origin of the nation, the people, and their national character... in the mists of, not ‘real,’ but ‘mythic’ time” (294). However, these tasks have not been easy to carry out. Because Canada was never able to establish roots before being swept up by the forces of modernity and globalization, our identity is free-floating; it is not attached to a particular origin or age, and therefore tends to focus on the recent past and present rather than on the “antiquity” celebrated in Europe, for instance. The result of this constant and rapid change is a national culture that is a strange bricolage of old colonial relics, appropriated Indigenous aspects, and self-conscious and self-promoting novelties, all against the backdrop of a multicultural mosaic that has lost much of the idyllic lustre it once possessed.

In order to understand when, why, and how the Canadian nation has become what it is today, I will delve into Canada’s past, a past “constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth” (Hall, “Diaspora” 226) – forces that intermingle and overlap at every turn. By drawing out examples from various aspects of Canadian history, identity, and culture, I hope to demonstrate the extent to which the idea of “Canada” has been mythologized and to explore the effects of this mythologization on Canadian national identity. My main source of guidance and inspiration for this project, Barthes’ *Mythologies*, informs my working definition of myth and will serve as a framework for my investigation of the many myths of Canada. I will also, at times, employ Jacques

Derrida's conception of myth as that which "cannot itself have an absolute subject or an absolute centre" (286) in concert with Barthes. I believe Derrida's definition, which constructs myth as something which is in itself lacking, adds another dimension to myth that will be highly valuable to consider in the Canadian context, as many of Canada's identity issues stem from this exact lack of definitive or unique characteristics. Debord's notion of the spectacle and his commentary on modern society will also appear throughout my project, informing my analysis of the symbols, activities, and practices that support the myths of the Canadian nation.

As Barthes says, the ultimate goal of myth is to transform history into nature; therefore, in order to paint a clearer picture of what Canadian nationalism looks like today, it is necessary to trace the stages and developments of Canadian identity to discover the "true origins" of the naturalized, taken-for-granted aspects of our current state. It is not enough, however, to study the overt and calculated displays of nationalism (federal campaigns, literature, museums, etc.) and assume that this is an accurate representation of Canadian national identity – there are many different perspectives and people within Canada that reject and even directly oppose this generic, prescribed formula of what Canadians and Canada should be. Therefore, a large part of my research will be dedicated to observing different aspects of nationalism in Canada and examining how everyday themes, symbols, and spectacles either advance or undo longstanding Canadian national narratives. In this regard, I share Barthes' "feeling of impatience at the sight of the 'naturalness' with which newspapers, art, and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history" (10). It is not just official displays of nationalism that construct the imagined

community of Canada, but everything from the words we use in daily conversation to the clothes we wear and the coffee we drink. I therefore seek as Barthes did to track down the “ideological abuse” hidden within “the decorative display of what-goes-without-saying,” the everyday, the banal (10). In the process, I hope to reveal the power structures in place, whom they benefit, and how they are perpetuated despite Canada’s reputation as a peaceful, tolerant, and equal-opportunity nation.

## Chapter Overview

My first chapter examines the earliest iterations of Canadian identity, employing Hall and Barthes’ notions of discourse and myth to track the many alterations, additions, and eliminations that Canadian identity has undergone up to contemporary times. To illustrate and focus my examination, I employ Michael Dawson’s *The Mountie from Dime Novel to Disney*, which provides an excellent crash course in Canadian history, as a case study. This case study focuses mainly on English Canada’s conception of the Mountie and how the NWMP – later, the RCMP – came to symbolize the nation both internally and internationally. Dawson’s text also crystalizes Barthes’ assertion that “there is no fixity in mythical concepts: they can come into being, alter, disintegrate, disappear completely. And it is precisely because they are historical that history can very easily suppress them” (119). Although the RCMP’s reputation as a representation of Canadian values and interests has remained constant, these values and interests have in fact changed so many times that they are entirely unrecognizable today. However, because myth both naturalizes history and historicizes nature, we have been repeatedly deceived into accepting each new iteration of Canada’s identity as its one and only. The conflicting accounts of RCMP history that Dawson details also demonstrate just how easy it is to

mix fact with fantasy in order to shape the collective memory of a population – something that I address in the second half of Chapter One through the works of several contemporary Canadian writers. In this later section, I consider the consequences of enforced remembering and forgetting on the collective memories of a people, and how myth works to obscure this constant process of historical revision. I examine the differences between English and French Canadian versions of “our” history and the effect of this division on the general population, which is for the most part rather ignorant of the people and events responsible for forming our nation. I also discuss how our memories and what we choose to remember are mirrored by our surroundings and the ways in which we construct our cities, monuments, museums, etc. Through this broad examination of how Canadians remember and reconstruct our history, I hope to lay the groundwork for my subsequent discussion of Canada’s mythopoetic practices in later chapters.

In Chapter Two, I explore the process of mythologizing difference that has been so crucial in Canada’s identity formation. Beginning with Canada’s separation from Great Britain, I detail the various differences and discrepancies that have been most heavily emphasized as a means of giving Canada a unique sense of self. I then discuss how this identity has been constantly challenged by the United States, resulting in a Canadian inferiority complex that manifests in an insistence on moral superiority and a healthy dose of criticism directed towards our southern neighbours. In the second half of the chapter, I turn my attention inward to the myth of a “unified, homogeneous Canada that stands united against the outside imperial forces of Britain and America,” following Eva Mackey’s assertion that: “The complex patterns of colonization and cultural and

economic development that create Canada have resulted in a situation in which the multiple identities which make up the nation are constantly at battle with each other, and in which the boundaries, inclusions, and exclusions of identity are unstable and constantly changing” (26). I argue that this ongoing battle for hegemony has always been skewed in English Canada’s favour, and therefore English Canada, particularly Ontario, has largely controlled the nation’s dominant narratives and discourses. I examine the existing geographic, regional, and linguistic differences between Canadians and how these complications have in fact been embedded into the newest iteration of Canadian identity: official multiculturalism. This “invented tradition” has enabled Canada to reimagine its internal fractures as a so-called multicultural mosaic comprised of different communities unified by their choices and values rather than by their origins. However, this model does not actually supersede difference, but instead reorganizes it so that it is more easily controlled and regulated; as I will conclude, while appearing to be an equalizing and tolerant policy, multiculturalism actually serves to reinforce the existing structures in which white, English-speaking Canadians hold the majority of the decision-making and nation-shaping power.

My third and final chapter looks at the symbols and spectacles that have been used to represent Canada over time and how they confirm my previous assertions of Anglo-Canadian hegemony. Guy Debord’s notion of the spectacle as the relationship between people mediated by images that both produces and perpetuates the views of the dominant group is entirely fitting in a Canadian context; because the spectacle “appears at once as society itself, as a part of society, and as a means of unification” (12), the images and activities we associate with Canada play an integral role in the collective

imagining of our nation. They are seen not only as unique to Canada but as immanently Canadian in their own right, which is highly problematic given that many of these symbols have been taken out of their original contexts and used to support an English Canadian agenda of (ostensible) unification. The first half of my chapter examines symbols of early Canada, many of which were tied to the notions of colonialism and conquest that had originally brought settlers to the land. I discuss how, in order to locate “the origin of the nation, the people, and their national character so early that they are lost in the mists of ‘mythic’ time” (Hall, “Question” 294), early Canadians engaged in the process of Indigenization, taking up many signifiers and symbols that would connect them to the earth and thus naturalize their rule over it. I then describe how this process of symbolic conquest also enabled English Canadians to subsume French Canada into the greater Canadian whole by deploying traditionally Quebecois signifiers in a variety of contexts. Moving to contemporary Canadian society, I investigate how English Canada has still managed to maintain hegemonic status despite the proliferation of seemingly neutral and inclusive signifiers that have replaced (or at least overshadowed) the more outdated and overtly colonized symbols featured in the past. I argue that the new, “one-size-fits-all” form of national spectacle and symbolism that we favour today still reinforces and reproduces the power structures in place by subtly highlighting those who do or do not “belong” in our mosaic.

Throughout all of this, my ultimate goal is to demythologize – and therefore also denaturalize, destabilize, and even denationalize – the Canadian nation we so often take for granted. By returning the myth of Canada to its history, I hope to illuminate some of the many inconsistencies and injustices that have gone largely unexamined due to our



collective ignorance and inability to confront our past. While it is true that all histories are, to some extent mythologized, this does not mean that we can simply blindly accept what we are told about who and what we are. It is not our official history books but rather the data or information that cannot be “reconciled within a certain narrative, and so [is] ignored or distorted by its author” that we need to consider in order to gain a fuller understanding of our nation’s past (Cavell 42). We must ask questions, look for contradictions and errors, consider who benefits and who suffers as a result of the “truths” we believe. It is with these convictions that I have taken up this project, which I hope will not only enlighten readers but also encourage them to engage in the process of demythologization as well, to see beyond the “decorative display of what-goes-without-saying” and thus open their eyes to the wealth of “ideological abuse” that has infiltrated every aspect of Canadian life.

\* \* \*

*“Here I am, before the sea; it is true that it bears no message. But on the beach, what material for semiology! Flags, slogans, signals, sign-boards, clothes, suntan even, which are so many messages to me.” (Barthes 160)*

## Chapter 1

### Myths and Memories of Canada('s) Past

*“Nations do not throw aside their old habits the way one throws away an old garment. One may tear away certain parts, but there remain shreds that form an incredible medley with the new clothes.” (Chateaubriand 384)*

*“As nations change, so does their history. Our past, like our government buildings and our highways, is often in need of renovation.” (Dawson 29)*

Because of the many social, political, demographic, and economic changes that Canada has undergone throughout its nationhood, the ways in which Canadian identity is understood have also been forced to rapidly adapt. New systems of meaning have arisen that undermine and even actively reject former identity markers, confirming Barthes' assertion that mythical concepts are not fixed but “can come into being, alter, disintegrate, disappear completely” (119). The nature of Canadian identity has been a source of concern, confusion, and contention for many theorists who have grappled with defining it over the years, for the very reason that it has been so hard to pin down – parts of history that were once celebrated have indeed been altered, disintegrated, or done away with altogether. This has been especially true in the last couple of decades, where our desire to uphold the mythical image of “Canada” has led to increasing conflict between how Canada presents itself or desires to be seen and how it is actually perceived by the internal “Others” who reject dominant Canadian narratives and discourse.

Although there are many examples that could be used to illustrate Canada's identity crisis, the RCMP is particularly apposite. The Mountie is one of the most globally recognizable symbols of Canada and has appeared everywhere from comic books to tourist brochures to television dramas. Because the Mountie is such a prominent

figure within Canada's mythic and symbolic landscape, great care has been taken to ensure that he (for the Mountie is always, indefinitely, figured as the masculine "he") cuts a strong, positive figure. However, the contours of this figure have changed greatly over time, as the RCMP has repeatedly altered and shifted its image in order to correspond to changing Canadian narratives and values. The first half of this chapter will therefore use the RCMP's transformation as a case study to explore and explain some of the various iterations of Canadian identity. Employing Dawson's *The Mountie from Dime Novel to Disney* to trace early Canadian myths – mainly figuring the nation as white and English-speaking – to contemporary times, I will highlight how the old stereotypes, ideals, and values that once defined "Canadianness" have become the quintessential aspects of Canadian identity that we recognize today.

The second half of this chapter will look at the impact of myth on collective national histories and the consequences of the selective means of remembering and forgetting that myth encourages, employing the works of a few contemporary Canadian writers who are particularly concerned with how Canada is handling its history. In addition to discussing the ongoing "renovations" to Canada's past, I will also note the effect of such an attitude on the physical markers of Canadian history. I will argue that the lack of concern for preserving Canadian history has direct material consequences on the spaces we inhabit; by favouring the new over the old, by breaking with the past not only in our minds but also in our cities and countrysides, we physically separate ourselves from the past iterations of Canadianism that are no longer fashionable or acceptable today. Through my consideration of the ways in which Canada commemorates – and conceals – its past, I hope to establish the connection between

myth, memory, and history within Canada, as well as how Canadian discourse has engaged with these three elements to construct our prevailing national narratives.<sup>4</sup>

### 1.1 The Mythic Mountie: A Case Study

The symbol of the Mountie is comprised of many conflicting aspects of Canada's cultural identity, some still visible today and others lost in the depths of our mythical past, having "become the prey of mythical speech for a while" only to later vanish when others rise to "take their place and attain the status of myth" (Barthes 108). This case study will employ historical records and chronologies to highlight some key aspects of the development of our national sense of self. Because the RCMP was formed only a few years after Canada's Confederation, the storylines of the Force<sup>5</sup> and nation have many parallels that reflect and magnify the issues Canada has faced throughout its century-and-a-half of nationhood. The historical elements I will discuss below are not, therefore, simply points of interest but are rather demonstrative of the mythological processes that were taking place in Canada at different points in time.<sup>6</sup>

The RCMP's past is a perfect example of Canada's self-conscious identity construction, achieved through "a genuine, popular nationalist enthusiasm and a systematic, even Machiavellian, instilling of nationalist ideology through the mass media, the educational system, administrative regulations, and so forth" (Anderson 114). While

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<sup>4</sup> Because the focus of my study is on Canadian myth, my goal here is not to provide extensive background on Canadian history but rather to examine how certain periods of that history influenced, and were influenced by, the prevailing myths and narratives of the time.

<sup>5</sup> An alternative title for the RCMP that I, following Dawson, will utilize throughout this chapter.

<sup>6</sup> As I will demonstrate, the RCMP can be considered a microcosm for Canada wherein the trends, ideals, and attitudes of general Canadian society were magnified and reified in most interesting ways.

the terms “nationalist enthusiasm” and “Machiavellian” might seem incongruous with Canada’s peaceful and democratic reputation, Dawson’s account certainly suggests otherwise.<sup>7</sup> The mythical Mounties seen in novels, films, and popular imagination<sup>8</sup> bear very little resemblance to the real “men in red” – and yet, the symbol of the Mountie has been so frequently and insistently disseminated that fictional stories of the RCMP’s achievements have often overshadowed its more mixed reviews (Dawson 53).

Considering Canada’s rather inconsistent identity, this split between the symbolic Force and the “real” Force has in fact been necessary for both to survive the test of time, as the “real” RCMP may engage in less honourable or widely-supported activities<sup>9</sup> without damaging its tolerant and benevolent “symbolic” reputation.<sup>10</sup>

In the “official”/mythical version of the RCMP’s history, this group of strong, vigilant men were responsible for establishing law and order in Canada’s North-West Territories, where the constant threat of “Indian warriors,” American whiskey traders, and the harsh natural elements imperiled the newly-formed nation’s tenuous peace and

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<sup>7</sup> As Dawson explains in his introduction: “In my research on the history of the Force, I have consistently come across two very different versions of the RCMP’S past [which] indicate clearly that despite the apparent lack of public debate, somewhere behind a veil of silence the battle for the RCMP’S – and the country’s – past goes on. The competing versions of RCMP history demonstrate how the Force’s accomplishments, setbacks, and duties have been drawn upon to substantiate ideological positions on issues as varied as nationalism, immigration, sexuality, and Aboriginal rights” (6).

<sup>8</sup> For a full discussion of the portrayal of Mounties in literature and film during this period, see Chapter Two (“Film and Fiction: The Mountie as Antimodern Crusader, 1880-1960”) of Dawson’s text (pp 31-54).

<sup>9</sup> As is currently the case with the Unist’ot’en camp in British Columbia, for example.

<sup>10</sup> This split echoes Debord’s assertion that the spectacle (or in this case, the spectacular depiction of the RCMP) “divides the world into two parts, one of which is held up as a self-representation to the world, and is superior to the world”; the mythical depiction of the Force is so strong that it overshadows the actions of the actual RCMP, persisting because Canadians, of course, prefer the version that creates a more flattering and positive reflection of Canada (22).

security. Initially known as the North West Mounted Police, this regiment was introduced by Prime Minister John A. Macdonald in 1873 as a means of ensuring that “the ‘Peace, Order, and good Government’ detailed in the British North America Act by the Fathers of Confederation would prevail” (Dawson 6). Entrusted with “the taming of the West,” the Force worked tirelessly to police the subdued Indigenous populations and ensure their adherence to the reserve system. The Force also suppressed strikes, rebellions, and any other disturbances to the public peace that might threaten the reign of British sovereignty. The RCMP, as the hyperbolic representation of British presence in Canada, symbolized the triumph of order, civilization, and even Christianity over the uncivilized or unknown.<sup>11</sup> The “Other,” whether American or Indigenous, outlaw or immigrant, was willfully overcome and forced to submit to Britain’s vicarious power. This version of the RCMP prevailed for quite some time, mainly because it was “supported and enhanced by popular writers during the first half of the Force’s existence” and promoted by “government publications and firsthand accounts by former Mounties [that] acted as resources for those wishing to learn (and write) about the Force” (Dawson 25). The hegemonic powers in Canada supported this romanticized depiction of the Mountie, as it upheld the image of Canadians as hearty, just, and ultimately Victorian in disposition, a newer and slightly more rugged version of their forefathers back in Britain.

The turn of the century brought new challenges for Canadians, many of whom were struggling to make sense of the societal, scientific, and economic changes that were

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<sup>11</sup> This official account connects the “frontier narrative,” wherein settlers arrived to find the land unoccupied and available, to the “tropes of civilization and progress” that were employed to justify European settlement of the land (Battell Lowman and Barker 34).

affecting their lives. The combined transformations brought about by modernization, urbanization, and secularization meant that the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a time of great apprehension; as authority became decentralized, the desire for “universal standards of truth and morality” increased (Dawson 34). There was a pervasive fear that the longstanding identities which had stabilized the social world were beginning to dissipate and lose meaning. In reaction, the central source of identification came to be figured, as Keith Walden explains, through symbols and myths, the only phenomena that “could transcend the limitations of rationality and logic and provide the fundamental reassurance that order was not repression, that identity was not invention, and that progress was not just change” (qtd in Dawson 34). For Canadians, this “fundamental reassurance” of a “central source of identification” was crystalized in the individual Mountie, a comfortingly familiar figure who encapsulated all of the admirable and constant qualities that a man, and by extrapolation, a society, should possess (35).<sup>12</sup> The Mountie was not only “the personification of Christian social harmony and conservative gender, class, and ethnic ideals” but also a “symbol of divinely ordained hierarchies, against which ethnic minorities, subordinate classes, and feminists could struggle but never prevail” (42-43). In other words, the Mountie operated as the ordained sign for the signified Christian order, providing a visible symbol for the fixed centre of meaning and order that Canadians so desperately desired.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> For a full discussion of gender and nationhood, see Anne McClintock’s *Imperial Leather*, especially Chapter Ten: “No Longer in a Future Heaven: Nationalism, Gender, and Race” (pp 352-390).

<sup>13</sup> This reputation garnered the RCMP a great deal of popularity into the 1900s, with its epitomization of English Canadian values of “Anglo-Saxon superiority and the righteousness of imperial destiny” (Dawson 53).

However, as the twentieth century progressed and the general sentiments and opinions in Canada began to shift, the older depiction of the RCMP was also forced to adjust. A number of political and social movements up to and during the 1960s led to greater awareness of (and identification with) the plights of “Others” within the nation. The Quiet Revolution in Quebec, growing awareness of and concern for Indigenous rights, and the possibility of patriating the Constitution led many Canadians to start to imagine themselves not as British subjects, but as members of an independent nation with its own issues and authorities. The RCMP was therefore forced to shed, or at least downplay, its imperialist ties to Britain, as well as its reputation for subduing the “Others” that were now integral members of Canadian society. Pierre Elliott Trudeau’s declaration of multiculturalism as an official national policy in 1971 and the institution of official bilingualism cemented the need for the RCMP to adopt a new identity. The opportunity to do so arose in 1973 with the “centenary” celebration, an event designed to complete the separation of the Mountie from his historical roots by severing all ties with the imperialist, racist characteristics that the Force had once valued (Dawson 180).

The first key to rebranding the RCMP was the careful rewriting of its past in order to “finesse awkward issues, either by reinterpreting them to cast a favourable light on the actions of the Force or by ignoring them altogether.” This allowed the Force to focus on themes of peaceful, rational evolution, laying the foundations for the liberal and tolerant ideals of contemporary Canadians (Dawson 111). This new account of history “was not a saga of British imperial expansion, but of Canadian nation-building, with the Force front and centre in a tale of progress” (149). The new version of events also figured the RCMP as protectors of Indigenous peoples, bringing old tropes of paternalism and protection



back to the forefront of Canadian-Indigenous relations. This new narrative also suggested that the positive aspects of the Force – tolerance, stewardship, respect, integrity – had always been inherently Canadian traits. This both flattered Canadians and cemented the RCMP within their minds as a symbol of Canadian values and beliefs, demonstrating, in Derrida’s words, the Force’s skill at “conserving in the field of empirical discovery... old concepts, while at the same time exposing here and there their limits, treating them as tools which can still be of use” (284).<sup>14</sup> Essentially, when it became clear that the older narratives that had served the RCMP so well in the past had begun to lose traction with the general public – thus reaching their limits of efficacy – the Force grabbed hold of newer and more modern concepts that could be used as tools to continue constructing and maintaining its public image.

However, even after having made every attempt to assimilate old concepts into new ones, the Force still found itself with a serious dilemma: all of the concepts and signifiers relating to the mythical Mountie and RCMP were centrally focused on English-speaking Canadians. The history of the Force was not looked upon favourably by those in Quebec.<sup>15</sup> The RCMP’s involvement in the hanging of Louis Riel (on orders from the Macdonald government) and the implementation of conscription during the Second World War were especially damning in the eyes of French Canadians (Dawson 103). This unfavourable view of the RCMP was dangerous, as it “decentred” the Mountie within

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<sup>14</sup> Derrida goes on to say that, “No longer is any truth value attributed to [these concepts]; there is a readiness to abandon them if necessary if other instruments should appear more useful” (5).

<sup>15</sup> From its earliest days, the NWMP/RCMP was widely regarded in French Canada as part of British Canada’s “plot” to bar French Canadians from the West (Dawson 186).

Canadian symbolism by exposing flaws and shortcomings that English Canada would have much preferred to ignore or overwrite. To overcome this issue and ideally create a unified (and positive) view of the Mountie across Canada, it would therefore be necessary to invoke new signifiers that could rise above the centuries-old tensions between French and English Canadians. To achieve this, the centenary committee invented a new tradition that was entirely devoid of political or historical meaning: “the charge,” later to be integrated into what is today known as The Musical Ride. As Dawson explains:

The Force was able to draw upon its famed equestrian abilities without designating a particular enemy against whom “the charge” was directed. Because the exercise was entirely self-contained, it had a transcendental quality: it referred to no specific history about which Canadians might disagree with each other. Since there was no opposition to “the charge” to which members of the Canadian community could relate, it and other images were to be used in a narrative that could summon up “Canada.”

(102)

Although Dawson’s text does not go into much more detail about “the charge,” I would like to pause to highlight its importance in representing Canada. Because “the charge” had “absolutely no background, it was seen as being representative of all of Canada” (102). The celebration of this lack of a central origin point is evidence of what Barthes calls the alibi: “a place which is full and one which is empty, linked by a relation of negative identity (‘I am not where you think I am; I am where you think I am not’).” “The charge,” as a mythical signifier of the mythologized RCMP, is “empty but present, its meaning absent but full” (122). Having exhausted the existing supply of mythical

material, believing it to be unpalatable for a wider Canadian audience, the Force took up an invented signifier imbued with symbolic meaning that was not in any way inherent to horses galloping to musical choreography. The ambiguity of “the charge” allowed for the RCMP’s central source of identification to occupy an area outside of space and time, thus mitigating the historically contingent circumstances which were undermining it in the first place.

Whether or not “the charge” effectively gained Quebecois support is not of particular importance; rather, I would like to emphasize the fact that the RCMP, having exhausted its chain of potential signifiers, went on to invent a new signifier that could be used to obscure and atone for the faults of the previous ones. Canada as a whole has undertaken this same project, to similarly mixed reviews and with varying levels of success. The point here is that we are no strangers to the shedding or taking on of signifiers when it is felt that they will be more generally and publicly supported. This is something that goes beyond the will of our governing bodies – for the RCMP, “the willingness of the public to accept a new version of its country’s past” was just as important to “reworking the national memory” as the actual steps taken by the centenary commission (Dawson 149). A large part of the success of Canada’s mythical identity is, therefore, the way in which each particular iteration appears to us as both natural and permanent, as if there has never even been any other “version” of Canada.

## 1.2 Learning Our Lesson – Or Not

The readiness to discard the more unsavoury aspects of our history is one that has had a significant impact on the way Canadians remember our collective past – and significant implications for the validity and accuracy of our collective memory. As the case study on

the RCMP demonstrates, it is not only possible but relatively easy to shape the memories of a given population with the right tools and timing. This is particularly true when there are certain aspects of history that people are willing, even eager, to forget. Canada is certainly not alone in this – every nation has had to downplay various aspects of their histories in order to produce a cohesive narrative that survives the test of time.<sup>16</sup> In fact, “having to ‘have already forgotten’ tragedies of which one needs unceasingly to be ‘reminded’ turns out to be a characteristic device in the later construction of national genealogies” (Anderson 201). Fitting, then, is the common figuring of nations as amnesiacs.<sup>17</sup>

It is this desire, even need, to forget that explains why Canada – and the Force in particular – has often shied from any sort of historical inquiry that would illuminate the crimes committed in the name of nation and national security. For example, it was not until the emergence of the concept of inalienable human rights and the formation of the United Nations in the mid-twentieth century that Canada was forced to confront the full extent of the atrocities being perpetrated against Indigenous peoples; this caused a great deal of embarrassment for the government, which had for so long sought to deflect attention away from this particularly heinous chapter of Canadian history.

Acknowledging the genocidal nature of the actions carried out against Indigenous

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<sup>16</sup> Anderson, for example, discusses how the French remember the St Bartholomew’s Day massacre simply as “la Saint-Barthelemy,” while the English conveniently forget that “William the Conqueror” was a foreign conqueror of England. In both cases, the popular titles serve as “ellipses” and euphemisms which invite and enforce forgetting with their very utterance (201).

<sup>17</sup> Canada, however, suffers from a different sort of amnesia than that of older, more established nations; while Billig states that “the nation, which celebrates its antiquity, forgets its historical recency” (38), the opposite is true for Canada.

populations required dredging up aspects of Canadian identity that had long since fallen out of popular fashion (despite continuing to operate in practice, albeit clandestinely), threatening the image of tolerant peacekeepers that Canada had tried so hard to cultivate following the implementation of official multiculturalism (which I will address in my next chapter).

This lack of emphasis on Canadian history has been a source of anxiety for many writers, among them, Andrew Cohen (*The Unfinished Canadian*), Richard Gwyn (*Nationalism Without Walls: The Unbearable Lightness of Being Canadian*), and Rudyard Griffiths (*Who We Are: A Citizen's Manifesto*).<sup>18</sup> Although differing in terms of aim, tone, and positioning, these three texts share a deep dissatisfaction with the level of knowledge that current Canadians possess about their past. Gwyn quotes Robert Fulford's musing that "Canadians [are] slowly obliterating the country's symbolic landscape," having "written off our history as unimportant, reducing it to little more than a series of picturesque and unconnected anecdotes" (282). Cohen's main concern is that Canadians "no longer teach our history" because "[i]t is unimportant to us. In some parts of the country, we simply ignore it; in other parts, we diminish it. Equally harmful, we distort it, deny it, and dismiss it, largely by concentrating on the wrong ideas and themes" (52).<sup>19</sup> The lack of emphasis on teaching history is a consequence of the lack of a

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<sup>18</sup> While Griffiths's text is not directly cited in this thesis, I will refer to a number of polls carried out by his organization, the Dominion Institute (now called Historic Canada). Many of the themes and concerns Griffiths discusses stem from the findings of these surveys and the broader work of the Dominion Institute.

<sup>19</sup> Of course, what distinguishes right from "wrong" themes is entirely subjective; in a study of secondary schools in English Canada and Quebec, the former were more likely to "[stress] events like Confederation, the two world wars, or the Charter" while in Quebec there was greater focus on "the discovery of Canada, the Conquest, or the post-1960 development of Quebec nationalism" (Resnick 38). More recent historical

consistently unified version of history that has persisted over time, an issue largely due to the French-English divide wherein one side is decried as “nationalistic while the other is inherently rational,” and neither can agree on a consistent account of what “actually” happened (Dawson 186).<sup>20</sup>

Walter Benjamin has argued that “history is always the tale of victors, celebrating their triumphs” (qtd in Billig 71). However, because Canada is a divided nation, the identity of the “victors” and what is counted as a “triumph” differ greater between French and English Canada, and even more so for Indigenous people in Canada. As such, the biases inherent in each version of history make it incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to create a unified, nation-wide narrative. We therefore tend to rely on myth to fill in (or at least smooth over) the gaps that loom between the differing accounts of our past. Cohen notes that the Quebecois’ emphasis on remembering history has the potential to provoke anxiety in English Canadians; “*Je me souviens*,” the “defiant slogan” gracing the Quebec license plate, is a direct refusal to surrender to the amnesiac forces gripping the rest of the nation, as well as a rejection of the prevailing Canadian myths of innocence, tolerance, and equality. English Canada’s unease with this is exemplified in Michael Ignatieff’s remark that, if the Quebec license plate only “invites the Quebecois to keep faith with the old quarrels, injustices, hurts, and slights,” he would “prefer [his] plate to read ‘I’ve forgotten.’” (Cohen 62). Ignatieff’s desire to forget the past can also be read as a desire

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events of the past century, such as the Conscription Crises of 1917 and 1944, the October Crisis in 1970, Quebec’s exclusion from the creation of Canada’s Constitution Act in 1982, and the well-publicized 1995 referendum are also remembered and recounted quite differently in French and English Canada.

<sup>20</sup> And even if this were possible, there would still, invariably, be other accounts or perspectives that would have to be omitted or altered in the process.

for Canadian unity, a unity that can only be achieved by relegating Quebecois history to our mythic past and replacing it with a sanitized, “safe” version of history devoid of conflict.<sup>21</sup> This is, of course, quite impossible: when Quebecers imagine “Quebec,” they take into account many years of (French) history and struggle, which have been carefully preserved and taught so as to ensure the continuation of French culture – a culture threatened by English Canada and its desire to subsume “Other” Canadians into its hegemonic order. Therefore, instead of trying to enforce a singular version of history, English Canada has simply taken to omitting or downplaying various aspects of its own history in order to avoid dealing with the awkwardness of conflicting viewpoints. However, this process of omission means that many of the particularities of specific historical events, places, and people have been almost completely erased from Canada’s collective memory. Cohen cites a 2006 poll by the Dominion Institute, which found that one third of participants were unaware that the Hudson’s Bay Company originated with the fur trade; less than ten percent knew that the Charlottetown Conference was the site of Canada’s Confederation in 1867; only a third recognized William Lyon Mackenzie King, while even fewer could identify Sir Wilfrid Laurier as Canada’s first francophone prime minister (55-58). Even more confounding was the discovery that less than fifty percent of Canadians could identify Sir John A. Macdonald as the nation’s first prime minister.

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<sup>21</sup> Cohen provides the specific example of the year 1885, stating that if English Canadians recall it at all, it is “generally as the date of the year in which the last spike was driven at Craigellachie on the Pacific railroad”; French Canadians, on the other hand, remember it as the year that Louis Riel was hanged (Dawson 135). Dawson notes as well that Riel was “appropriated as a martyr to the French Canadian nationalist cause” following his state-sanctioned and RCMP-executed death, which further exacerbated tensions between the Quebecois and their English counterparts (26).

While familiarity with Macdonald has greatly increased in recent years, his renewed notoriety has certainly not been for the reason Griffiths and the Dominion Institute would have hoped. The 2017 controversy over renaming schools bearing Macdonald's namesake, instigated by the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, called people to "recognize [Macdonald's] central role as an architect of genocide against Indigenous peoples, the impact that this has had on the relationship between Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students, parents, educators, and the ways in which his namesake buildings can contribute to an unsafe space to learn and to work" (Ballina n.p.). Similarly, a statue of Macdonald was removed from the front steps of Victoria City Hall in 2018, after a year of deliberation. These incidents exemplify the way in which myth attempts to "suppress," to use Barthes' word, certain aspects of Canadian history that no longer conform with the rapidly adapting narrative of peace and tolerance. As Macdonald's problematic role in early Canadian-Indigenous relations has become more obvious (and impossible to ignore), he is disappearing from our public spaces. This does not necessarily represent a renunciation of his actions, but rather confirms Canadians' discomfort with the errors of our past and even our inability to deal with them directly – it is easier to simply rename our schools and knock down statues than to address the deep-seated flaws and problems with the ways Canadian society operates. In this sense, Canadian myth "harmonizes with the world, not as it is, but as it wants to create itself" (Barthes 157); myth produces a particular image of the world that conforms to and confirms our preexisting expectations of what the world should be. In contemporary Canada, this means a tolerant, kind, equal society that does not permit oppression, and therefore all evidence to the contrary is to be hidden away or destroyed.



### 1.3 Physical Forms of Forgetting

This inability to confront our demythologized past is evident not only in the ongoing revisions to namesakes and monuments, but also in the general lack of concern for the preservation of physical markers of Canadian history. This lack of concern is a direct consequence of Canadians' attitude towards our past; we do not want to conserve the outdated or unfashionable versions of our history, even if they might serve as learning tools, because they remind us of a past we do not necessarily want to remember. As Mordecai Richler bemoans in his brief critique of Canadian architectural practices in *O Canada, O Quebec!*, many Canadian cities are guilty of destroying or devaluing our historical markers. He cites Gerard Morisset, who states that: "There are two ways to spoil a country. Either get rid of its monuments one by one... or bury them amid a mass of architectural mediocrity to hide them from view; or detract from their architectural qualities by cluttering up their surroundings" (109). Richler sees Montreal as having chosen the first option, noting how "Mayer Jean Drapeau, hungering for a larger tax base, untroubled by any appreciation for aesthetics," permitted the destruction of "one old building after another," a process which he calls "positively criminal" (108).<sup>22</sup> Richler quotes d'Iberville-Moreau, who states that:

Now that many outstanding treasures of our past have been torn down in the name of progress, we can enjoy them only in photographs while bitterly regretting their loss. For such vandalism there is no rational explanation

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<sup>22</sup> Richler is particularly rueful about the 1971 demolition of the Prince of Wales Terrace at the bidding of McGill University, and "its replacement by a building of the utmost banality" (108).

other than our own ignorance or – worse – stupidity: the blind indifference of the city fathers we ourselves elected... [and] the self-righteous contempt that so many people have for the arts and culture of any period other than their own. To them our old buildings are nothing but piles of rubbish devoid of interest, hindrances to modern development. (109)

This lament, although especially relevant in Montreal (the subject of d'Iberville-Moreau's text), applies to Canada more broadly as well; cities such as Toronto, London, Hamilton, and many others have wasted no time in either tearing down old edifices or surrounding them with high rise apartments and offices. The corporations that sanction such urban developments are not concerned with the preservation of Canadian "heritage" and therefore have no qualms about altering the Canadian urban landscape.<sup>23</sup> And yet, such a lament is also greatly complicated in Canada because of our colonial past.

The discussion surrounding the destruction of Canadian heritage sites also serves to obscure yet another layer of complication regarding physical markers of memory: these older buildings themselves signify a long history of colonial imposition upon Indigenous peoples and their land. Whenever Canadians lament the loss of these buildings, we are actively forgetting the loss of the original land on which they stood and what this land meant to its Indigenous inhabitants. In Canada's mythic past, we were the first to settle the land, and therefore our original settlements are worthy of

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<sup>23</sup> This concurs with Debord's assertion that "[u]rbanism is the mode of appropriation of the natural and human environment by capitalism, which, true to its logical development toward absolute domination, can (and now must) refashion the totality of space into *its own peculiar decor*" (121).

commemoration and should be preserved; we thus fail to recognize the previous presence that would undermine our claim to Canadian territory. Cohen implores Canadians to remember that “history is not only found in classrooms and textbooks” but is also “written in the wood, stone, steel, tin, brick, and glass of houses, churches, legislatures, schools, libraries, statues, cemeteries, convents, bridges, factories, and other great public edifices” (62). And yet, history is also found in the land itself, something which many Canadians do not acknowledge. The myths and narratives that govern our lives today demand that we forget both Indigenous presence before us and our own absence from the land – as well as our role in the subjugation of Indigenous peoples, which has been memorialized through the mere presence of our buildings and monuments.

Because of the desire for a sanitized and “safe” version of history that does not draw too much attention to Canada’s previous faults, physical markers of Canada’s past are now seen as detrimental to its narrative-building project, since they invoke memories of earlier versions of Canada that are contradictory to the current iteration, memories of colonial days that we would rather forget. This is one of the issues embroiled in the Sir John A. Macdonald schools controversy: we are not able to easily forget or downplay Macdonald’s role in the oppression of Indigenous peoples, and that makes us, collectively, supremely uncomfortable. However, obliterating Macdonald’s name from our public buildings and roadways does not solve the problem but simply obscures its presence; we are thus be able to claim ignorance, but certainly not innocence. As far as the Canadian state is concerned, though, these two are one and the same in that Canada is exempt from having to actually confront its past in a productive and thoughtful way.

The obliteration of Canadian landmarks and heritage sites is a double erasure that attempts to erase the evidence of our erasure of Indigenous presence – we thus replace the memorials of our wrongdoings with shiny new buildings that better reflect our more optimistic, forward-looking mindset. And so, as various historical signifiers and namesakes fall into greater disrepair, the myths and narratives of contemporary Canada actually gain power; without physical evidence to refute the dominant narratives of peace and tolerance, they can more easily control the nation's dominant discourse and ignore the darker aspects of our past.

#### 1.4 Je Me Souviens?

As Dawson reminds us, “[t]elling stories means making choices. Writing a history means selecting a beginning, middle, and an ending as well as selecting ‘appropriate’ evidence to support the story” (25). The story, in this case, is the narrative of a nation – people must believe it in order to believe in their nation and their place within it. As such, the story must be seen to reflect the values, sentiments, and loyalties of the population in order to be readily absorbed and perpetuated – a task greatly complicated in Canada by the fact that these values, sentiments, and loyalties have been difficult to pin down consistently throughout our nationhood. As a microcosm for Canadian society, the RCMP represents Canada, not only in the literal and popular sense of its symbolism, but also in the way it has carefully created and presented itself, mimicking the nation's every advance and alteration (albeit slowly, at times). The Canadian mythic past is, as Barthes says, “neither a lie nor a confession” (128), but rather a clever demonstration of how those “who [possess] history” – be it the RCMP or the state more generally – give it “an orientation a direction, and also a meaning” (Debord 96). The new orientation of

Canadian history seems to be angling towards the erasure of what fails to comply with Canada's current identity, both from our history books and from the land itself (just as "the charge" has successfully expunged all traces of the RCMP's violent past). The issue is further complicated by Canada's lack of political and cultural unity even in its earliest days, leading to wildly different perspectives on the events of Canada's past based on cultural background and experience.

Without a central history upon which to base its national narratives, Canada struggles to find and uphold a singular account that is pleasing to all its inhabitants; alternative or "Other" perspectives simply cannot be reconciled with the dominant narrative, as evidenced by the many underlying material conflicts within Canadian society. One could say that Canada is haunted not so much by external forces as by the spectres of its own past, the plethora of mythical concepts which have been forcibly expelled from Canadian discourse as we move "steadily down (or up) history" (Anderson 26). The process of cultivating and proclaiming our national narratives will continue to be one of constant review, revision, and removal – of remembering and forgetting, for better or worse, the events and individuals that brought us to this present moment in time.

## Chapter 2

### Fractions, Fictions, and Frictions: Defining Differences in Canada

*“The key to feeding our skepticism is creating differences. That the differences may be narrow, that they may be overstated, that they may not even exist does not matter; inventing and nourishing those differences sustains an irrepressible and indispensable Canadian nationalism.” (Cohen 111)*

*“While cultural difference and pluralism may be highlighted to distinguish from external ‘others’, they are also managed internally so as to reproduce the structuring of differences around a dominant culture... The power and the choice whether to accept or not accept difference, to tolerate it or not, still lies in the hands of the tolerators.” (Mackey 29)*

As Kobena Mercer has observed, “identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent, and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty” (qtd in Hall, “Question” 275). For Canada, a nation that has struggled with doubt and uncertainty for the entirety of its nationhood, identity has never been easy to define or delineate. This is, perhaps, what has made Canadian identity so susceptible to mythologization; as Barthes notes, “in general myth prefers to work with poor, incomplete images, where the meaning is already relieved of its fat, and ready for a signification” (125). Because of its youth and because of its constant need to rebuild its identity based on popular prevailing ideals, Canada has never possessed strong, “inherent” signifiers of its own.<sup>24</sup> The case study of the RCMP in Chapter 1 demonstrates just how difficult it has been for Canada to construct a cohesive overarching narrative that reflects the nation’s sentiments and values, due to the speed at

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<sup>24</sup> As I will discuss in my next chapter, the majority of Canada’s main signifiers were either imported from Britain or France or appropriated from Indigenous cultures.

which these values were changing. The case study does not, however, explore the external pressures that were also integral in Canada's identity formation. These outside forces often threatened to subsume Canada, both geographically and culturally, and therefore caused a reactionary pushback and consolidation of traits into something that could be uniquely identified as "Canadian." Without strong, independently developed traits fostered over centuries (as was the case for many European nations), Canada has been forced to identify through opposition, through "what we are not."<sup>25</sup> As such, a key thread that emerges from the confusion and chaos of Canadian identity is the notion of difference.<sup>26</sup> This chapter will therefore examine the ongoing Canadian projects of external and internal differentiation, which are crucial to the larger project of national identity formation.

The first half of this chapter will focus on English Canada's early attempts to formulate and propagate a sense of distinction from its metropole. For Canada, the distinction between colony and colonizer has always been blurry; as white, British descendants, the early English-speaking settlers considered themselves the "rightful" rulers of the land,<sup>27</sup> but as British subjects they were also completely at the mercy of their mother nation. Initial conceptions of difference between "proper" British subjects and

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<sup>25</sup> This is not new – as Derrida states, the concept of the sign has been "determined by... opposition throughout the totality of its history" (281).

<sup>26</sup> Collective identities are often reliant on what Sigmund Freud calls the "narcissism of small differences," leading to the exaggeration of any and all markers of national difference, no matter how small or seemingly-inconsequential (High 210).

<sup>27</sup> As a 1915 Canada Steamship Lines brochure proclaims, Canadians are "a new race of strong, virile men. To them, the earth is their destiny, the things of the earth their heritage..." (Kubinsky 195).

northern or Canadian British subjects were based on geography and stock,<sup>28</sup> emphasizing the heartiness and courage of the “virtuous men [read: Canadians] with an instinct for freedom, liberty, and the rights of property” who had chosen to settle the new world (Wright 45). As Canada moved toward independence, these differences also came to include Canada’s supposed exemption from the colonial project, and indeed from all violence – a trait that would also come to divide Canada from its neighbours to the south.<sup>29</sup> Canada’s project of difference-identification was greatly complicated by the presence of the United States, a similarly young and isolated British colony that constantly threatened to consume the significantly more “vulnerable” Canada. Even after the immediate threat of absorption had passed, English Canada was still forced to consciously and urgently emphasize the differences between Americans and Canadians in order to retain some sense of cultural uniqueness. This self-conscious desire for difference has remained a crucial part of the Canadian conscience into contemporary times. However, upon close examination of the differences Canadians claim, it is clear that they are mythological constructs, produced to provide Canada – the nation with far fewer people, less global presence, and little economic clout – with a sense of superiority and pride based on false binaries and stereotypes.

Furthermore, the idea of a unified, homogeneous Canada that stands united against the outside imperial forces of Britain and America might be the most audacious myth of

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<sup>28</sup> Charles Camsell, geologist and Commissioner of the Northwest Territories, referred to Canadians as “those of British stock possessed of the pioneer spirit” (Cavell 31).

<sup>29</sup> As Gwyn notes: “We’ve never had to fight for our independence...We’ve been denied, therefore, the sustaining myths of martyrdom and of a struggle against occupation and oppression that are such powerful bonding agents in most nation-states” (17).



all. As Mackey states: “The complex patterns of colonization and cultural and economic development that create Canada have resulted in a situation in which the multiple identities which make up the nation are constantly at battle with each other, and in which the boundaries, inclusions, and exclusions of identity are unstable and constantly changing” (26). Canada is and has always been riddled by internal differences which prevent any sort of singular Canadian narrative and identity from forming. Longstanding tensions between Indigenous communities and settler colonizers, between English and French Canada, and between provinces have elided the possibility of a unified Canada, which cannot even speak of a “we” without simultaneously slighting the “nous.” The second half of this chapter will detail the internal myths of Canada and the way in which English Canada, specifically Ontario, has solidified itself as the mythological “centre” of the nation, invoking geographic, linguistic, and political factors to assume hegemonic status.<sup>30</sup>

## 2.1 Breaking Away from Britain

As my analysis of the RCMP’s history points to but does not directly address, much of Canada’s early identity was based upon racial “stock” and superiority.<sup>31</sup> As Mackey

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<sup>30</sup> I concur with Mackey that “the important question... is not ‘How does dominant power erase difference?’ but rather, ‘How might we map the ways in which dominant powers maintain their grip despite the proliferation of cultural difference?’”; this also involves asking “how ‘threatening’ and ‘dangerous’ differences are contained, controlled, normalized, stereotyped, idealized, marginalized, and reified” (19).

<sup>31</sup> During a lecture in 1869, lawyer and “Canada Firster” Robert Grant Haliburton told his audience that: “A glance at the map of this continent, as well as at the history of the past, will satisfy us that the peculiar characteristic of the New Dominion must ever be that it is a northern country inhabited by the descendants of northern races.” Haliburton later employed heavy nationalistic rhetoric, asking: “What is the stock from which we have sprung? Who are the men of the North and what is their place in history? Can the generous flame of national spirit be kindled and blaze in the icy bosom of the frozen North?” His answer was, obviously, a resounding yes; in what Grace calls “the Social Darwinian rhetoric of the day,” the North could only produce (and be tamed by) “conquerors, leaders, and visionaries” (58).

notes, early forms of Canadian national identity were derived from the belief that Canada was the “Britain of the North”: “a ‘northern kingdom’ whose unique and distinctive character derived from its northern location, its ferociously cold winters, and its heritage of ‘northern races’” (43). Canadians were portrayed as possessing not only the sensibilities and sophistication of British subjects, but also an inherent heartiness and ability to endure the elements.<sup>32</sup> As Cavell notes, “the initial resistance of the wilderness made its eventual yielding all the more complete and meaningful, for the pioneers were now worthy to possess such a land: in Darwinian terms, they had proved their fitness and superiority” (31). This supposed superiority, which had enabled Canadians to survive and even thrive in the new and harsh environment, was used to justify their dominion over the Indigenous peoples who had been living on the land for centuries. Although it is true that Canadians did not seek to eradicate physical Indigenous presence in the same way that Americans did, many projects to control and corral Indigenous populations were undertaken (some which persist to this day). These attempts to establish dominance and enforce a racial hierarchy were undertaken in imitation of the colonial structure that Britain had successfully employed many times; such structures and impositions were not regarded negatively but as necessary aspects of nation-building and governance (as the RCMP’s clearing of the western frontier indicates). The narrative was still one of white

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<sup>32</sup> Cavell notes that “[a]s the early settlers moved from civilization into the wilderness, they were moulded by the environment into people of a new and distinctive type. The task of the pioneers was to conquer the frontier and to transform it into a civilized land... they were forced to conform to the ways of the wilderness, and this experience changed them forever. The civilization that they built was therefore [considered to be] higher and better than the civilization of Europe, which was now both literally and figuratively left behind” (31).

supremacy, of British imperialism, of conquest in the North.<sup>33</sup> History was transformed into nature; those with British blood came to appear “naturally” suited to rule and to create civilization in the vast, lawless lands.

As ties with Britain began to unravel, however, Canada could no longer cling to its image as the “Britain of the North”; instead, the emphasis was placed upon Canada’s inferior status as a colony of the great British empire. This sense of separation and isolation would continue to grow throughout the nineteenth century, leaving Canadians feeling marginalized and victimized on a grand scale.<sup>34</sup> As Mackey argues, seeing oneself as a victim lessens one’s feelings of guilt or complicity; for Canadians, being a colony of Britain meant “appropriat[ing] the identity of marginalization and victimization to create national innocence” (24), a prevailing Canadian identity marker throughout much of the twentieth century. The dichotomy between colonial power and colony became, by extension, a dichotomy between perpetrator and victim. This new imagining of Canada deemphasized the internal victimization, colonization, and subjugation of Indigenous peoples that had been integral to early Canadian narratives of conquest. I say “deemphasized” rather than “hid” because as Barthes explains, “myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts” (128). The violence committed by Canadian settlers lost its

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<sup>33</sup> As Cavell states: “Unlike the British, Canadians saw the settlement and exploitation of the North, and perhaps even the Far North, as a necessary part of their nation’s development” (24). She cites Vilhjalmur Stefansson, a Canadian-born Icelandic explorer and ethnologist who was “convinced that the true frontier spirit was essential to Canadian success in the North,” and who wrote often of the “northward course of empire” that would be necessary for Canada to fully realize its potential (19).

<sup>34</sup> Malcolm asserts that when the British “left” Canada in 1867, they “instilled magnificently in Canadians an inferiority mindset from the start” (qtd in Cohen 45-46). Hastings also notes that English Canadian nationalism, “in its formative stage at the turn of the century, was often expressed in the absence of British imperialism” (151).

ignominy when placed in contrast to the violence committed by the British empire (and the United States); Canadians could thus take pride in the comparatively “minimal” violence they enacted on a global scale. Therefore, while Canada maintained British sophistication and sensibilities, it was untarnished by Britain’s long legacy of conquest, relieved of any culpability in the colonizing project. As such, Canadians were not only more steadfast than the Brits; they were also “inherently” less violent and prone to conflict because of their separation from Britain. History was once again transformed into nature, although this time “history” was limited to Canadian soil and did not extend back to the motherland. “Our” nature referred not to British subjects but to Canadian citizens, who had carved out a tenuous identity independent of (despite still being, in many respects, dependent on) Britain.

## 2.2 American Animosity

Although Canada’s ties with Britain have now been relegated to institutional structures and street names, for the most part, our perception of and relationship to America continues to be fraught with uncertainty, tension, and downright animosity. As Canada was transitioning from British colony to independent nation, it was also fending off attacks from the United States, a much closer and more threatening force. These attacks would turn from literal (as in the War of 1812) to economic and cultural, with the growing American influence on trade regulations, corporations, media, and pop culture. As such, the creation of difference between “us” and “them” would emerge as a crucial aspect of Canada’s national identity and self-image. This emphasis on difference is perhaps even more prominent today in the Trump era than it has ever been; indeed, it seems now that our most “Canadian” trait is the fact that we are not American. Many

Canadian writers<sup>35</sup> have taken up this quandary in their work – although Americans, as it is often bitterly observed, rarely fret over American-Canadian relations<sup>36</sup> – with widely varying conclusions and stances on our relationship to the United States. The fact that we collectively spend so much time worrying about our relationship with America is quite telling: if Canada were more self-confident and independent, it would not need to constantly seek points of superiority (however small) over America. Indeed, this very desire and search for superiority, a reflex of the inferiority complex we so obviously suffer from, is now an integral aspect of what it means to be Canadian.

In Canada's early days, the main source of difference was racial, although this was often passed off as mere geography; as Lawren Harris wrote in 1926, "Canadians are in the fringe of the great North and its living whiteness... It seems that the top of the continent is a source of spiritual flow that will ever shed clarity on the growing American race, and we Canadians being closest to this source seem destined to produce an art somewhat different from our Southern fellows." Harris' statement clearly indicates that "Canada was to be the white head on America's mixed-race body" (qtd in Watson 95), as it was presumed to be racially superior due to its closer linkage with Britain. The south was envisioned as a "degenerate, effeminate" place (Grace 58), standing in strict opposition to the frigid, stoic vigour of the North. The "resistance of the North" was seen as something that would ensure that Canadians stayed "fresh and young and adaptive

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<sup>35</sup> Including Michael Adams, Norman Hillmer, Andrew H. Malcolm, Anthony Wilden, Andrew Cohen, and Phillip Resnick, to name a few.

<sup>36</sup> America, Terry Eagleton observes, "is its own norm. It finds it hard to view itself from the outside. It is not greatly taken with cultural comparisons" (81).

long after the American national character had deteriorated through the absence of frontier conditions” (Cavell 32).

This sense of innate superiority, as I will demonstrate, continues to inform current Canadian myths about ourselves and about Americans – myths that, given more than a few moments’ consideration, are obviously untrue, yet continue to be used as validation and evidence for Canadian precedence. The same logic of differentiation from Britain regarding violence also took place between early Canada and the United States; it is well known that Canada prides itself on merely assimilating, rather than annihilating, Indigenous populations, and even more so on our lack of institutionalized slavery. However, Glen Coulthard critiques this view, stating that:

Canada is no different from most other settler-colonial powers: in the Canadian context, colonial domination continues to be structurally committed to maintain – through force, fraud, and more recently, so-called “negotiations” – ongoing state access to the land of resources that contradictorily provide the material and spiritual substance of Indigenous societies on the one hand, and the foundation of colonial state-formation, settlement, and capitalist development on the other. (6-7)

Certainly, some Canadians are aware of the history of oppression and violence that enabled our nation to become what it is today, but we are so inundated with myths of our own goodness that we simply push the crimes of the past from our minds. As Barthes says, mythical speech is woven from “material which has already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication” (108); people are more apt to believe “facts” that

fit into their preexisting worldview or perspective, information that confirms rather than challenges their beliefs. While it is true that people who have shared many of the same social and material conditions for extended periods of time will have more cultural and psychological similarities – to deny this “would be to suggest that their social conditions played no part in their formation, which is by and large a conservative rather than a progressive case” – there is no biological element that determines a person’s national characteristics (Eagleton 8). The notion of “innate” Canadian goodness, which is constantly fed to us by the state, media, and one another, has been naturalized in the Canadian psyche and embedded within the imagined community, despite having no factual (or genetic) basis.

A large part of this positive self-identification stems from a “narrative that centralizes the individualism and heroic efforts of small groups of people, isolated either by geography or by cultural difference, who make their way in the world through determination and drive” (Battell Lowman and Barker 34). It is through these types of stories and framings that Canada is able to promote a narrative of tolerance, peace, and innocence despite a past, and indeed present, deeply imbued with colonialism. The ongoing processes of oppression, Coulthard notes, are consistently downplayed in contrast to the United States’ “Trail of Tears,” the massacre at Wounded Knee, and other similarly notorious crimes. Our own violence is, again, eradicated through binarism. This binarism informs contemporary Canadian discourses surrounding the United States, emphasizing the wrongs in American society to downplay our own. For example, Gwyn writes that “[t]he Americans had the Vietnam War and riots in Watts and Harlem; we had

medicare and peacekeeping.<sup>37</sup> Today, they have the homeless and assault weapons; we have social programs and gun registration” (49). While these statements are not inherently false, the chiasmic structure of Gwyn’s statements produces a stark division between American and Canadian society. “Their” violence and poverty are contrasted with “our” innocence and tolerance in accordance with Canada’s position as a subservient colony, which stands against the rebellious Americans who achieved their emancipation through violent means.<sup>38</sup>

Interestingly, Canada is also now thought to have retained more of its “Europeanness,” meaning that we possess greater sophistication and civility – although none of the guile or greed that European nations demonstrated during the colonial era.<sup>39</sup> Thus, as Cohen states, “The Canadian is not the European, riven with ancient feuds and simmering hatreds, nor the American, possessed of ambition and confidence that have brought great achievements and great affliction” (215). Again, while this ideology is not necessarily incorrect, it purposely deploys mythical language, producing an inductive system that carefully constructs European and American identities as a dichotomy that absolves Canadians of either series of faults. As Barthes says, it becomes “a type of

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<sup>37</sup> Dawson et al. note that Canada is actually now ranked near the bottom of the UN’s list of peacekeepers, well behind Ethiopia and Bangladesh – and even below the United States (2).

<sup>38</sup> Hector Mackenzie notes how Canada is known for “Pearsonian internationalism” which “represents a disinterested effort to improve relations among nations, especially by mediation and conciliation, and thereby the advance the prospects of peace and the good of humanity.” He explains that “this purpose has often been contrasted with the policies and actions of the United States, which are seen as less noble. Making a difference in the world has usually been depicted as differentiating Canadian from American foreign policy” (105).

<sup>39</sup> As Eagleton notes, “Europe is a civilization rich in experience, but one that is somehow tainted. Guilt and corruption are never far from the coruscating surfaces of social life” (173). This stands in direct contrast to Canada, whose newness gives the illusion of naïveté.



causal process: the signifier and the signified have... a natural relationship” (130) in which innocence becomes a result of Canadianism in and of itself. The various facets and events of Canada’s past (the “materials of mythical speech”), “however different at the start, are reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth” (113) – that is, they are condensed and homogenized into a singular means of signification that can then be contrasted and compared with other symbolic entities, such as the imaginary constructions of Britain or America as inherently dominant, oppressive forces.

While the distinctions between Canadians and Brits or Americans might seem obvious to us, they are not readily apparent to much of the outside world. Many Canadians travelling abroad have been asked if they are (or have been “accused” of being) American, which is received as a great affront. This is because “[s]omehow, in ways difficult to articulate, the magic of ‘our’ name matters to ‘us’ deeply... it indicates who ‘we’ are, and, more basically, *that* ‘we’ are” (Billig 73). There is a “natural” reaction against the insinuation that Canadians are actually more like Americans than we want to believe; it seems impossible that outsiders cannot tell “us” apart from “them.” This is ironic because we are, indisputably, entirely caught in America’s economic and cultural grasp – we watch their television shows, listen to their music, root for their sports teams, vacation in their cities, etc. It is, then, the ability to return to Canada, to return from otherness, that gives us a great sense of superiority and relief.<sup>40</sup> This “return” can be either literal – in the sense of the snowbirds flying back to Toronto after spending the

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<sup>40</sup> I concur with Keohane that Canada is “constituted by a process of reflexive realization whereby it comes to know itself and recognize itself, and becomes knowable and recognizable, in its returning from encounters with otherness” (17).

winter in Florida – or figurative, taking place through the ongoing, self-conscious comparisons Canadians like to make between “our” society and “theirs.” We have Justin Trudeau, they have Donald Trump; we have universal healthcare, they have privatization.<sup>41</sup> It is not until the comparison has been made and we have come out on top that Canadians can feel more assured in our status and affirmed in our collective “choice” to be Canadian.<sup>42</sup> The binaries thus continue to proliferate, each time in Canada’s favour.

This constant and self-conscious weighing of positives and negatives is not just an innocent quirk but in fact a necessity for the survival of Canadian identity. As Cohen says, “[t]earing Americans down... makes Canadians feel better about [our]selves.” And yet, the fact that “there is subtlety about Americans frustrates our natural instinct to create or seek difference, to draw those self-satisfying easy and sharp distinctions. If we are really less different vis-à-vis the Americans than we think, we are less certain about our identity” (128). The ways that Canadians figure Americans, the ways we choose to delineate our national identity, are thus entirely arbitrary, although we believe them to be intrinsically linked to our Canadianism. Traits that are observed in Americans, although they certainly exist in many Canadians as well, are inductively used to generalize an entire nation, whereas in Canada they are dismissed as individual or special interest group issues. As Michael Billig states, “Complex habits of thought naturalize, and thereby

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<sup>41</sup> As featured on a 2007 internet cartoon: “Mommie, what is a Canadian?” “It’s an unarmed North American with health insurance, sweetie” (Krasnick Warsh 199).

<sup>42</sup> I say “choice” because being Canadian is not an original or natural position but is rather always due to a decision made by each citizen’s family at some point in time. While it could be argued that this is true of every citizen of every nation, it is especially pronounced in Canada due to its proximity to the United States (which many early Canadians considered to be greener – and warmer – pastures) and its large immigrant population, as both factors are largely based around the choice to leave or come to Canada.

overlook, ‘our’ nationalism, whilst projecting nationalism, as an irrational whole, on to others. At the core of this intellectual amnesia lies a restricted concept of ‘nationalism,’ which confines ‘nationalism’ to particular social movements rather than to nation-states” (38). Canadians reprove the American “cult of the flag,”<sup>43</sup> instead congratulating ourselves on Canada’s more reserved and understated national pride; every trait that we assign to Americans becomes a counterpoint in our favour. These traits, when consistently projected on an outgroup, become stereotypes and solidify in our national conscience (81). These mythical projections affirm Barthes’ idea that “myth is a type of speech defined by its intention... much more than by its literal sense,” and that this “intention is somehow frozen, purified, eternalized, made absent by this literal sense” (122). It is utterly nonsensical to believe that all Americans are arrogant, boisterous, flag-waving racists, and yet that is what they abstractly tend to become in the Canadian imagination. As such, anything that agrees with this existing image of America “henceforth appears both like a notification and like a statement of fact” (123), confirming our pre-existing notions and thus bolstering our self-image.

### 2.3 “From Sea to Shining Sea”

Throughout this paper, I have been consciously using the first person plural when speaking about Canadians in relation to outside powers. This is in keeping with Billig’s assertion that “nationalism is an ideology of the first-person plural, which tells ‘us’ who ‘we’ are. There can be no ‘us’ without a ‘them’” (79). And yet, there is so much internal division within Canada that it is quite impossible to envision a collective Canadian “we”

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<sup>43</sup> See page 39 in Billig’s text for more on the “cult of the flag.”

that actually represents all citizens. For instance, the “we” employed in this chapter thus far refers mainly to English Canadians, who feel much more threatened by their linguistic and cultural closeness to America than French Canadians would ever have reason to be. Billig asserts that “‘we’ is an important feature of the syntax of hegemony, for it can provide a handy rhetorical device for presenting sectional interests as if they were universal ones... hegemonic discourse is marked by such an elision of ‘we’s’” (166). Canada is not the unified whole it purports to be when “speaking” as an entity, but rather a deeply divided and fractured “community of communities”<sup>44</sup> currently ruled by English Canadian hegemony. This English “we,” as the “voice of the Canadian nation,” is a fiction in that it “tends to overlook factional struggles and deaths of unsuccessful nations” – or communities within the nation – “which make such a fiction possible.” I concur with Billig that “different factions, whether classes, religions, regions, genders, or ethnicities, always struggle for the power to speak for the nation, and to present their particular voice as the voice of the national whole, defining the history of other sub-sections accordingly” (71). English Canada has long held the upper hand in this regard, despite complaints that it lacks a “cultural centre”;<sup>45</sup> in particular, Ontario has become the central hub of decision-making power in Canada, as the most heavily populated province with the highest percentage of English speakers. Billig states that “the battle for hegemony, which

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<sup>44</sup> As Prime Minister Joe Clark described the Canadian nation during a campaign speech in 1979.

<sup>45</sup> Gwyn has argued particularly vehemently for this position, believing that “English Canada’s most obvious handicap is that it doesn’t exist. It has no capital and no centre; Toronto, the single credible candidate, inspires fear and envy among all others. English Canada is fractured into regions and provinces... and more recently into ethnicities, races, and even genders. Officially, it does n’t exist at all” (114). However, this argument, as I will discuss below, is premised on physical proximity and “power in numbers” rather than on the prevailing power structures that actually do favour English Canadians in many ways.

accompanies the creation of states, is reflected in the power to define language... the power to make meaning stick” (32). As such, the idea that Ontario resides at the “centre” of Canada is a myth produced by the dominant group in order to solidify and speak on the nation’s behalf. In the following pages, I will examine the repercussions of this privileging, considering the issues both of regionalism and of linguistic and cultural threats to French Canada.

As William Lyon Mackenzie King once noted, “If some countries have too much history, we have too much geography” (StatsCan). This geography, according to Andrew H. Malcolm, serves mainly to create and exacerbate divisions between Canadians; he identifies Canada’s provinces as “varied, sprawling, separate kingdoms” that have little in common “save their dogged determination to remain separate and their abiding suspicion of each other.” In Malcolm’s view, Canada is “a conservative collection of regional solitudes separated from each other by formidable natural barriers and from their natural American neighbours by artificial political boundaries” (qtd in Cohen 44). Thus, the idea of “Canada” does not come from any single source of unification but instead emerges from a range of distant and unique landscapes bound by legal terms more than by any sort of shared, lived experience. Although the band The Travellers might have told us that “from Bonavista to Vancouver Island, from the Arctic Circle to the Great Lakes waters, this land was made for you and me,” in reality these distinct regions have very little in common. Canada’s regions rely on vastly different industries and resources to support themselves, which leads invariably to tension and discord depending on the state of these industries and the extractability of resources.

The differences in landscape and industry create different needs and concerns for provinces and their citizens, many of whom feel ignored or unappreciated by the federal government.<sup>46</sup> As Gwyn says, this “central Canadian conspiracy” that “Westerners forever rail against is mostly the product of geography: Ontarians and Quebecers, clustered together with no physical barrier between them,” can more easily conspire together than the prairie provinces and British Columbia (268). The western and northern parts of Canada, being so sparsely populated compared to Ontario and Quebec, do not have the same political clout; furthermore, the prairie provinces’ reliance on the agriculture, forestry, and energy industries is becoming less fashionable in a world where buzzwords like “green energy,” “sustainability,” and “resource management” are proliferating. Canada, in its latest quest for positive identity markers, is beginning to turn away from old sources of income and towards the technology and services industries, which favour the more densely populated and closely-packed provinces of Ontario and Quebec.

Issues abound on the opposite side of the country as well; R.M. Vaughn’s “Lobster is King: Infantilizing Maritime Culture” clearly indicates that the Atlantic provinces also bear resentment towards central Canada. According to Vaughn, the hegemonic centre of English Canada figures Atlantic Canada as a quaint and idyllic representation of older,

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<sup>46</sup> To note a few passages from Patricia Roy’s article on British Columbian dissent: in 1942, journalist Bruce Hutchison told Prime Minister Mackenzie King of “a growing dissatisfaction within Canada itself, a feeling repeated on all sides, that Canada has no real interest in British Columbia... Your problem of national unity ... is not confined to Quebec any longer” (244); politician William Vander Zalm echoed this sentiment in 1986, saying that British Columbians “see Ottawa without diminishing difficulty whereas from the East, BC at times seems somehow diminished in scale and size, and as a result in importance” (247); one British Columbian complained to the *Toronto Globe* that Easterners “know about as much of our habits, manners, and ways of thinking, as they know about the people of Alaska” (236).

simpler times, largely ignoring its ongoing existence and struggles. He discusses the Maritimes' unwilling involvement in Canada's mythopoetic processes, saying that "[t]he Atlantic provinces are a geographical hyperbole in the national text, and the people who live [there] have provided the centre with a key mythology in the narrative of nation building – the mystery of the folk, the feudal drama of an early 'homeland' people who mark the beginning of the timeline of progress" (169). By representing Maritimers as old-fashioned and somewhat backwards, the rest of Canada appears to move farther forward on the march of progress while maintaining its "old-time charm" (which is now confined to one particular area of the country). It is no surprise, then, that Atlantic Canadians have little love for their western counterparts.

#### 2.4 "We" ou Non?

As the discussion above highlights, regional identity varies widely within Canada, belying the complex set of power relationships at work within the nation. Mackey states that "[p]eople from out West call themselves 'Western Canadian,' and from the East, 'Maritime' or 'Eastern' Canadians, whereas many from Southern Ontario have the privilege of simply calling themselves 'Canadian.'" This "ability to define oneself as simply 'Canadian' reflects a regional nationalist conceit that comes from having a position of power and thus conceiving of one's region as the geographical and conceptual centre of the nation" (180). I would argue that this insistence on being simply a "Canadian" (without any hyphenations or qualifiers) also comes from Ontario's close

proximity to Quebec, the most threatening and powerful “other” within Canada.<sup>47</sup> While it is not within the scope of this project to fully delve into the history of English-French relations in Canada, I would like to briefly explore the implications of this internal difference and how it has become a rallying point for the national project of multiculturalism.

As Kieran Keohane notes, “hatred and fear of Quebec’s distinctiveness reflects a fear and hatred of the rest of Canada’s lack of distinction,” and thus forces a consolidation and solidification of English Canadian identity in reaction to the French. This is because Quebec, as the most prominent Canadian Other, constantly reminds the rest of “us” of “the semantic void at the heart of the social that underpins our own existence” (22). Because Quebec appears to be so tightly-knit and unified – as it must be, to some extent, to ward off the constant danger of cultural assimilation from both English Canada and America<sup>48</sup> – it appears as a threat to the mythically-constructed unity of the rest of Canada, a unity that has been falsely imposed by English Canada in order to present a strong front against external forces. Perhaps the most threatening aspect of all of this is Quebec’s vehement resistance to symbolic alignment with the rest of the Canadian nation. As data from a 1995 cross-national public opinion survey shows: “Twenty-nine percent of Quebec respondents... defined themselves as Quebecers only; 29

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<sup>47</sup> Quebec is “the ‘they’ that falls outside of the ‘we,’” where “the ‘we’ is a vanishing point, an allusive [or] elusive ideal that expresses the desire for a radical and plural democratic community” (Keohane 169).

<sup>48</sup> Quebecers are “inundated daily by American television channels, both network and cable, and American films, magazines, and pop music. So if they have grown increasingly chippy, even paranoid, the truth is that they feel they are manning a vulnerable dike in their attempt to hold back a surging wave” (Richler 55).



percent as Quebecers first, but also Canadian; 28 percent as equally Quebecer and Canadian; 6.7 percent as Canadian first, but also Quebecer; and 5.4 percent as Canadian only” (Resnick 45). For many Ontarians and other English Canadians, Quebec’s refusal to identify as primarily “Canadian” causes resentment, even rage. It is as though Quebec is trying to destroy the carefully constructed façade of unity that “we” have worked so hard to project outwards; “their” desire to leave compromises Canada on a grand scale, leaving “us” vulnerable to the United States and other potential colonizers. However, as Keohane explains:

The threat of discarding the Other, bidding adieu to the rest of Canada, letting go of Quebec... is a potent but empty threat. There is no letting go. The centrifugal forces that we fear will tear Canada asunder actually reflect the increased tempo of the spiral dance of the dialectic in which the oppositional Others are mutually bound. They cannot release each other, because (a) they depend on one another’s presence for their integrity, and (b) their boundaries and frontiers have been melted into one another. No sooner are the lines of solitude re-established than they are melted away again by the heat of the antagonistic friction of the wars of position (27).

These wars of position take place in “hegemonic systems of rule that operate by incorporating their opposition, at least up to a point.” The goal of each oppositional movement engaged in such a war is the delegitimization of the hegemonic system and the erosion of consent or participation in that system (Omi and Winant 142). The war of

position in Canada has been going on since Canada's earliest days<sup>49</sup> and has taken on many different iterations, which is why Keohane suggests that the very boundaries between French and English have been irrevocably affected and altered by constant "antagonistic friction."

This antagonistic friction came early on from literal invasions (as with the Conquest of 1760) and the battle for trading routes; later on, it manifested in the Quiet Revolution, Bill 101,<sup>50</sup> attempted separation, and a lot of pushback from a federal government that was largely concerned with English Canada's best interests. The constant tug-of-war between absorption (English Canada) and resistance (French Canada) has made it hard to tell which elements of each culture are "inherent" and which are reactionary responses to the other; it has also resulted in ugly stereotypes and resentment. Again, we see the power of difference in defining culture, although this time there is no need for fabrication. These differences are so emphatically asserted that both English Canadians (especially those in Ontario) and French Canadians (mainly the Quebecois) have come to imagine their particular societies, politics, activities, and values as being intrinsically linked to their linguistic and cultural identities.<sup>51</sup> A causal process has

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<sup>49</sup> For an excellent discussion of early French-English relations in Canada, see Part One of Desmond Morton's "A Short History of Canada" (pp. 1-85).

<sup>50</sup> Bill 101 in 1977 "ordered the francization' of any company with more than fifty employees... It declared that all English, or even bilingual, commercial signs would be illegal by 1981. It established a Commission de toponymie to rename towns, rivers, and mountains that bore English names and so offended the visage linguistic of la belle province. And it pronounced French the province's only official language, a violation of the British North America Act, killing the two-century-old convention that had endowed French and English with equal legitimacy" (Richler 15).

<sup>51</sup> As Rene Levesque, founder of the Parti Quebecois, so eloquently wrote in 1968: "We are Quebecois... What that means first and foremost – and if it need be, all that it means – is that we are attached to the one corner of the earth where we can be completely ourselves; this is Quebec, the only place where we have the unmistakable feeling that "here we can be really at home." Being ourselves is essentially a matter of

developed wherein language has become a grounding element of identity, a key area of difference that must be delineated and defended. This is particularly true in Quebec; although such a sentiment might not make sense to English Canadians who have long enjoyed linguistic hegemony in Canada, for French Canadians language is the summa of their entire culture, their entire people.

As such, despite longstanding hopes and visions of a unified Canada, there are no means, either mythical or literal, of overcoming the linguistic and cultural divisions that have led to decades, even centuries, of discord and resentment. This goal of genuine unification, in the sense of equal power, is undesirable for both “sides”; neither wants to “give in” to the other by conceding its own power. English Canada will not forfeit its hegemonic position and French Canada cannot lose the cultural heritage and distinction that it has fought to protect for so long. Interestingly, this stalemate has resulted not in separation (although it almost did, as per the 1995 Quebec Referendum) but in the institutionalization of linguistic and cultural difference through the Official Languages Act (1969) and subsequent policies. As I will discuss below, however, the institutionalization of difference actually allowed the federal government to circumvent its issues with French Canada – by shifting the focus away from English-French tensions, it was possible to nullify Quebec’s longstanding demands for special status while avoiding the affront of an outright refusal.

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keeping and developing a personality that has survived for three and a half centuries. At the core of this personality is the fact that we speak French. Everything else depends on this one essential element and follows from it or leads us infallibly back to it” (Richler 12).

## 2.5 Divide and Conquer

The importance of language in the battle for hegemony cannot be emphasized enough; the recognition of French as an official language in Canada, in theory, gave a voice to the thousands of people who had until then been “cut off from multilingual Europe, adrift in a monolithic Anglo sea” (Richler 55). However, this recognition of French language was swiftly undermined by an even larger and more ambitious project: the institution of official multiculturalism by Pierre Elliot Trudeau in 1971. While this policy was instituted as a result of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, its goal to “preserve the cultural freedom of all individuals and provide recognition of the cultural contributions of diverse ethnic groups to Canadian society” (Gagnon et al. para. 1) also sought to eliminate Quebec’s status as a “distinct society.” It is notable that this policy also undermined Indigenous claims for self-government, status, and land. In effect, both Quebecers and Indigenous people became just one of the many facets of Canada’s “cultural mosaic,” a move which incorporated and thus negated the uniqueness of these cultures.<sup>52</sup>

By officially instituting and thus naturalizing and embedding the idea of national tolerance and multiculturalism, the Canadian government was able to reshape Canada’s national identity. No longer would Canada be a nation divided by French and English tensions, but a nation comprised of many different linguistic and ethnic communities unified by their choices and values rather than their origins.<sup>53</sup> This new official identity,

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<sup>52</sup> This is exemplary of English Canada’s successful war of position.

<sup>53</sup> Eagleton points out that “[o]ne way of unifying a nation is to bring it together around certain common values”; however, the issue with this is that there are no explicitly Canadian values, any more than there are

which has prevailed for close to fifty years and is now firmly entrenched in the Canadian conscience, affirms that myth creates a “natural image” of reality wherein “things lose the memory that they once were made” (Barthes 142). Indeed, for people born after the policy’s instatement (such as myself), the discourse of Canadian multiculturalism has taken on a natural, innate quality that blends into the backdrop of our everyday lives. It is now “experienced as innocent speech: not because its intentions are hidden... but because they are naturalized” (130). Trudeau’s edict was the perfect “conjuring trick” that “turned reality inside out” by replacing the historical aspects of reality with “nature” (142).

This “conjuring trick” also solidified white, English-speaking Canadians at the centre of the nation, a move which offered “original” Canadians in marginalized regions a means of positive identification through difference (essentially, a sense of superiority over foreigners or “Others” who are not naturalized citizens). As Canada’s identification as a tolerant nation demonstrates, “while cultural difference and pluralism may be highlighted to distinguish from external others, they are also managed internally so as to reproduce the structuring of differences around a dominant culture” (Mackey 29). White, or “Canadian-Canadian” culture, has become normalized as the “cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed” (34), appearing natural and neutral in comparison to the plethora of “new” cultures that Canada has supposedly welcomed with open arms. New ethnic populations are idealized as “picturesque and colourful helpmates and allies in the national-building project” (79), their presence permitted by their acceptance of the

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“Tibetan or Tahitian values. No nation has a monopoly on decency, justice, humanity and compassion... some countries [just] stress certain values more than others” (150). He ends by warning that “[o]ne should recognize cultural differences, but not make a fetish of them” (151).

dominant culture and awareness of their dependence upon it for continued support. As such, the purpose of the official multiculturalism policy is not to “erase difference but rather... to institutionalize, constitute, shape, manage, and control [it]” (83). Essentially, official Canadian policies promote equal opportunity and freedom of expression, but only insofar as these opportunities and expressions do not threaten the existing structures and systems.<sup>54</sup>

Canadians of many ethnic backgrounds may take up the various activities, products, and pastimes that will supposedly enable them to become true “Canadians,” but they will never be able to achieve such status in the eyes of the dominant group for the simple reason that they are not white and English-speaking. Even if she is toting a hockey bag, drinking Tim Hortons coffee, and sporting a maple leaf toque, a Canadian of South Asian ethnicity is still far more likely to be questioned on her heritage<sup>55</sup> than a white person engaging in the same activities, or even in activities predominant in other cultures. As the logic goes, because Canada is multicultural, English Canadians are “entitled” to enjoy all aspects of the various cultures that are subsumed into and support our national culture. Thus, a white, middle-class woman from Oakville can eat Lebanese food, enjoy French music, wear clothes by an Italian designer, watch Turkish soap operas, read books by Argentinian authors, and still feel entirely Canadian. Because individuals in today’s

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<sup>54</sup> Han concurs with Mackey, asserting that: “Tolerance is actually a conservative practice because otherness is merely tolerated. It still maintains a stable self-image bound to a clearly defined identity. Furthermore, it strictly delineates the self from the other. Nor is the practice of tolerance free from domination. The power-holding majority allows minorities to remain” (*Topology* 47).

<sup>55</sup> As Andrew Chung points out, “the very existence of questions [about racial background] proves that the answers matter. And this exchange, whether benign or not, makes a distinction and implies a difference between the one asking and the one answering” (305).

society “express their authenticity primarily through consumption,” such choices merely indicate preferences rather than genuine differences (Han, *Expulsion* 19). As such, English Canadians can partake in the enjoyment of other “folk-cultures”<sup>56</sup> without compromising their Canadianness – whereas people of other ethnic backgrounds purchasing or participating in the same manner would be subject to uncomfortable questions or assumptions. Therefore, despite claims of equality and acceptance, there is still always a divide that insulates English Canada within the multicultural mosaic, enabling white, English-speaking individuals to go unquestioned and uncontested in their displays of Canadian identity.<sup>57</sup> When this divide is pointed out, however, it is explained away with a gesture toward the neutrality and openness of Canada’s current identity, which claims to celebrate diversity, even though this diversity can only exist within certain limits of acceptability.

By situating itself outside of the structure, English Canada is able to retain its place of power within the nation. Multiculturalism “implicitly constructs the idea of a core English Canadian culture”; accordingly, “other cultures become ‘multicultural’ in relation to that unmarked, yet dominant, Anglo-Canadian core” (Moodley qtd in Mackey 15). English Canada is constantly negotiating the cultural representations of other groups in Canada so that they complement, but do not disturb, the central culture which is still

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<sup>56</sup> There is, supposedly, a notable difference between culture expressed through music, dance, cuisine, etc. – so-called “folk culture,” which does not threaten the hegemonic power – and “true” culture, which is a conglomeration of everything that makes up Canadian life.

<sup>57</sup> Interestingly, one tends to founder when pondering the nature of white, English-speaking, “Canadian-Canadian” culture and idiosyncrasies; as discussed earlier, because of vast differences in landscape, economy, language, and location, there is no quintessential “Canadian” way of life that is not riddled with flat (and clearly false) stereotypes and outdated ideals.

very much imbued with themes of colonialism and white (particularly British) superiority. The lifestyle choices that Canada now promotes are mere decoys, ploys to keep the Others occupied while ensuring that English Canadian privilege is not affected. The supposed desire for “unity” within Canada, promoted through our stories, symbols, and systems, is not a genuine project but rather simply a means of reframing the existing social order so that it is more acceptable in today’s globalized context.

## 2.6 Unity Through Division?

Since its earliest days, Canada’s identity has been constructed through a constant process of differentiation. This differentiation has been both external, from metropole and potential (American) invaders, and internal, between the many factions fighting for recognition and power. As a result, Canada has rapidly transitioned from a proudly-British colony to a nation that claims to encompass all nations, a “global village” that welcomes and accepts all peoples. However, this transition has not been organic and free of motivation, but has rather taken place in response to different threats to English Canadian hegemony. By appearing to relinquish power through the institution of multiculturalism – and thereby nullifying French Canadian and Indigenous claims to special status – English Canada, particularly Ontario, has in fact been able to cement its central positioning in Canada’s power structures.

While this multiculturalism appears to have created unity through difference, in reality it serves only to “promote the infinite proliferation of points of view, standpoints, and different identities on which antagonistic *doxai* are grounded” (Keohane 171). This is not a productive form of difference that truly respects and recognizes Canadian Others, but rather a means of exerting and maintaining control over them. Thus, the



institutionalization of difference has precluded – or perhaps simply reaffirmed – Canada’s inability to establish internal unity. The unified image that Canada presents to the rest of the world is a myth, necessary for self-preservation and yet highly problematic in its elimination of many of the nation’s voices. In truth, Canada does not have (and has never had) a single cultural, geographic, or linguistic foundation. The nation is eternally split, even fractured, in ways that cannot and should not be ignored.

Modern Canadian identity is therefore shaped not by legitimate traits or accomplishments so much as by a fierce and pervasive drive for difference from our neighbouring and parent nations. It is only through the “they” that the “we” has emerged, a “we” that continues to speak on behalf of all Canadians in an attempt to convince both itself and the world of a Canadian unity that simply does not exist. In my final chapter, I will explore how this “we” has come to represent the Canadian whole materially through a variety of symbols and spectacles, creating a uniquely Canadian “brand” that supports the idea of Canadian unity by obscuring internal differences while playing up the “uniquely” Canadian traits that supposedly set us apart. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate how English Canada has cemented itself at our nation’s core, despite appearing to have situated itself as just another colourful (or colourless, to be more precise<sup>58</sup>) piece of the Canadian cultural mosaic.

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<sup>58</sup> Whiteness, Mackey says, “often comes across as emptiness or absence, and is almost always defined in reference to otherness and to difference, as if ‘only nonwhiteness can give whiteness any substance’” (35).

### Chapter 3

## Marketing Our Myths: Symbolic and Spectacular Representations of Canada

*“[T]o say that symbols are invented is not to say that they are created out of nothing... Rather it is to say that symbols are produced, transformed, and employed by individuals, corporations, and the state. They [are] made and remade at specific moments for specific reasons.” (Dawson et al. 5)*

*“Anyway, if the maple leaf is Canada’s symbolic national emblem, then maple sap and its syrup constitute our symbolic blood. You eat it at breakfast, along with our national sacred starch dish, the pancake.” (Coupland 70)*

Barthes has said that “myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were made” (142). As my previous chapters have demonstrated, Canada is not only capable of sustaining multiple grand narratives but has also proven extremely adept at both adopting and constructing symbols that reinforce our myths about who and what we are. By separating signifiers from their original signified concepts, sanitizing them, and attaching them to new concepts, Canada – specifically English Canada – has been able to appropriate and assume control over a broad range of symbols that are no more native to us than we are to the land we inhabit. Because “one signified can have several signifiers” – and indeed, “the mythical concept... has at its disposal an unlimited mass of signifiers” (118) – the Canadian nation can be represented by a variety of symbols, even some that might seem incongruous or contradictory.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> This is possible, Barthes writes, because of “the abstractness of its concept”; in the same way that “the concept of tree is vague [and] lends itself to multiple contingencies,” the notion of “Canada” has always been rather abstract and fluid, entirely dependent on the time in which it is being defined. Even while certain qualities or characteristics are celebrated as being “Canadian,” there is always a remainder “around

It is through these many symbols that Canadians' social relationships are mediated and maintained, as they provide rallying points for Canadians to recognize and reaffirm their "Canadianness" on a daily basis. Appearing in all aspects of Canadian life, from radio and television to grocery stores and community centres, these symbols constitute the Canadian spectacle, which Debord identifies as "the very heart of society's real unreality" (13) – and thus, the very heart of Canadian mythopoesis. Debord's notion of the spectacle does not simply refer to "false" or illusory ideas that "mask an otherwise 'true' social reality." Rather, Debord asserts that lived reality itself has now become "false" in the sense that it "has been turned into a mere representation of a genuinely self-determinate experience" (Bunyard 37). The society of the spectacle is a society that has become "detached from its capacity to consciously shape and determine its own future" because it does not understand or control its own activities, because it does not have a way to form meaningful relationships and connections (4).<sup>60</sup> We no longer control the world around us because it is constantly being supplied through a "panoply of commodities, adverts, shop-fronts, fashions, and entertainment" (371) that has been "produced, transformed, and employed by individuals, corporations, and the state" to create "a web of understanding" that dictates how we relate to one another and to ourselves (Dawson et al. 5). Wrapped up in this web, Canadians forget that many of the seemingly innate or natural aspects of the modern Canadian nation are no more than

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the final meaning, a halo of virtualities where other possible meanings are floating" which prevents the privileging of a single signifier (132).

<sup>60</sup> In *Mythologies*, the translator notes, Barthes likewise uses the term "spectacle" to describe "the interplay of action, representation, and alienation in man and in society" (6).

imitations and appropriations, alternately banished to and dredged from the depths of Canada's mythic past as dictated by the times.

In this chapter, I will examine how the symbols and spectacles that represent (and market) Canada have continued to influence one another, repeatedly passing through the "turnstile" of our national mythology to create the strange bricolage that we identify today as being uniquely – and unproblematically – Canadian. I will consider the "wide range of apparently disparate phenomena" (Debord 14) that have come to represent Canada and how the dissimilarities between such phenomena are unified and explained through the concept of the spectacle. This will involve an analysis of a handful of key symbols of Canada and how they relate to one another; it will also involve the demythologization of these Canadian symbols by restoring their historical contexts and content. Through this restoration, I hope to illuminate the processes by which English Canada has been able to maintain its hegemonic positioning and power over time through both symbolic and spectacular means.

Certainly, although English Canada has been quick to discard the more distasteful aspects of our history, it has been surprisingly amenable to the preservation and appropriation of symbols arising from "histories, geographies, and cultures outside the spatial and ideological boundaries of Ontario" (Cavell 136). Intent on asserting dominance and establishing control within the young nation, early English Canadians, particularly those in Ontario, took up key symbols and signifiers of other cultures, mainly Indigenous and French, in order to both devalue the symbols in their original context and to demonstrate their powerlessness against English Canadian culture (which was often thought of as being simply "Canadian"). These symbols of greater "Canada," which

range from maple syrup to canoes to poutine, are very rarely identified by English Canadians or non-Canadians as being appropriated from other cultures; this in itself is indicative of myth's ability to naturalize history, to absorb concepts and represent them as though they have always, unquestionably, been part of a system.

While French and Indigenous symbols are certainly still present in English Canadian culture today, if less overtly so, the latest trend in Canada's project of mythologization is the apparent turn away from older symbolic ties and towards an "all-inclusive," "one-size-fits-all" approach that aligns with our multicultural identity. The second half of my chapter will highlight the ways in which "Canadianness" is spectacularized and commodified to project a seemingly unified national identity that supersedes – and yet also celebrates – diversity. I will focus particularly on the spectacular nature of Canada's "obsession" with hockey and Tim Hortons, two aspects of Canadian identity that, despite apparently being removed from cultural, political, racial, and potentially hostile contexts, actually do reinforce older Canadian stereotypes and ideals, albeit in a covert, understated manner.

### 3.1 Early Myths

In the time before the rise of what Debord calls "spectacular society,"<sup>61</sup> Canadian identity was not dictated by a centralized source, but rather gathered piecemeal from available elements in the immediate environment. As discussed in Chapter Two, the myths and symbols of early Canada were very clearly tied to notions of colonialism and conquest,

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<sup>61</sup> Debord believes this type of society did not emerge fully until the 1920s.

two prevalent themes that emerged during the Age of Discovery.<sup>62</sup> Canadian identity was predominantly thought of as an extension of Britishness, but with a certain hardiness and intrepidity that permitted the settlers to endure Canada's harsh climate and inhospitable lands. The land, and particularly the North, became central to people's understanding of and identification with the idea of "Canada." As Jody Berland states:

[H]istorically, Canada's most visually and touristically [*sic*] elaborated symbol came to be its landscape – an uncontroversial means for its citizens to imagine and aestheticize a 'natural' white (and I don't simply mean snow-bound) collectivity otherwise deprived not only of identity, but also of topographic and climatic logic, and implacable presence: that was the unsaid metonymic in the patriotic landscape. (29)

This fascination with the North took material form in novels, paintings, songs, and poems created by individuals wishing to assert their vision of the young country that had not yet developed a sense of self; it was also reified through the mapping, photographing, and documenting of the land's geographical contours by those who sought to capture and thus control one of the nation's most prominent features.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> The Age of Discovery, also called the Age of Exploration, refers to the period in European history (from the early fifteenth century to the early seventeenth century) characterized by an emphasis on overseas exploration and the development of notions of globalization, colonialism, and mercantilism.

<sup>63</sup> For example, Sherrill Grace discusses Brian Harley's 1988 study "Maps, Knowledge, and Power," in which he claims that maps are "the weapons of imperialism" that work by benefiting the powerful while "silencing or excluding others" in society. According to Harley, maps are "pre-eminently a language of power, not of protest" that, unlike "literature, art, or music, [appear] to have few genuinely popular, alternative, or subversive modes of expression (79). As such, maps are very much a part of our national mythology, as they give concrete form to what would otherwise remain in our imaginations: the physical contours and edges of our nation.

Perhaps the best-known artistic depictions of Canada come from the Group of Seven, a group of early twentieth-century landscape painters. Their representations of the rugged wilderness elevated the Canadian landscape to high art, defining what was to become a uniquely Canadian art sensibility with their portrayals of a harsh environment that was entirely distinct from both British and American terrain.<sup>64</sup> However, as many critics assert, their works, which are conspicuously devoid of human presence, connote an “uninhabited, unmapped, unnamed territory” ripe for the taking (Watson 93). The paintings thus unintentionally substantiate the notion of *terra nullius* and “the awful logic of emptiness” in which the land was seen as simply “empty and waiting to be claimed” (49).<sup>65</sup> While this is not to suggest that the Group of Seven consciously engaged in the erasure of Indigenous presence, it is telling that Canada’s most famous artworks, which largely shaped early understandings of the Canadian “North” and wilderness, were produced by white and (predominantly) English-speaking individuals.

Grace identifies a similar issue within early Canadian literature, noting that whenever Indigenous peoples appeared in pre-1950s texts (which they rarely did), it was only as “exotic others, as metonymies for a savage landscape” (185). In fact, much of early Canadian literature revolved around the northward journeys of lone white men (or

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<sup>64</sup> As Mackey notes, “the northern discourse of the Group of Seven, at a later stage of national self-consciousness and differentiation, symbolically differentiates Canada from both the USA and Britain by mobilizing a symbolism of unpeopled and rugged wilderness. It is a northernness that is not American, and a harsh wildness that is not European, or at least not British” (54).

<sup>65</sup> A.Y. Jackson noted his unease with this in his 1958 autobiography, writing that, “After painting in Europe where everything was mellowed by time and human associations, I found it a problem to paint a country in outward appearance pretty much as it had been when Champlain passed through its thousands of rock islands three hundred years before” (25).

boys) who would be subjected to a series of trials and tests that, if successfully completed, confirmed their “superiority over the North (rivers, cold, emptiness), its wild animals, and other human beings” (185). This literature often focused on a core group of Canadian historical figures – Sir John Franklin, Albert Johnson, Tom Thomson, René Richard, and Grey Owl – who were “continually reproduced by northern narratives because they fit the script,” which here means fulfilling the role of masculine conqueror of the North (sometimes successfully and sometimes not).

In terms of literary representations of early Canadian figures, Captain Sir John Franklin is a particularly interesting case to consider; as Wright notes, literary, poetic, and musical depictions of Franklin figure him as a “symbol of masculine conquest, stubborn resilience, and romantic futility.” In doing so, these depictions have “transformed the Franklin expedition into a national myth, a usable story to be told and retold in any number of ways with any number of meanings” (43). Northrop Frye even described this British voyage of Arctic exploration, led by Franklin in 1844, as a “great Canadian theme” (Cavell 15). As recently as 2014, when the wreck of the *Erebus* (Franklin’s ship) was discovered just south of King William Island, it was revered as a symbol of “Canadian Arctic sovereignty”; Stephen Harper referred to the expedition as “part of our country’s broader northern narrative and northern identity,” proclaiming that Canadians today are still “answering the age-old call of the North, keeping faith with the explorers and adventurers who have gone before us, and breaking trails for the generations of Canadians yet to come” (qtd in Wright 44). This statement, which plays on old tropes of conquest and domination, clearly demonstrates the power of the myth of Canada’s colonial claim to the North even in today’s supposedly post-colonial climate.



### 3.2 Indigenizing the Nation

Both this positioning of the North as a Canadian symbol and the erasure of Indigenous peoples from the visual and literary representations of early Canada are very much “linked to the colonial project of possession” (Wright 49); indeed, “the very way Canadians conceive the large territory their nation claims sovereignty over is saturated with a genocidal intent” (Watson 93). By imagining the Canadian landscape as “empty,” it is much easier to also imagine it as rightfully – and solely – “ours.” Although this no longer creates issues for contemporary Canadians living in a globalized world, for early Canadians the prospect of an empty, savage land was much more threatening. Such emptiness and isolation led to feelings of uprootedness and distance from the British metropole, of insecurity and doubt. “The problem,” as Margaret Atwood sardonically posed it, was: “What do you do for a past if you are white, relatively new to the continent, and rootless?” (qtd in Watson 95). The solution to this problem, for early Canadians, was to engage in the process of “Indigenization,” which they believed would provide the stability and rootedness that their vast, indomitable landscape simply could not. As Keohane says, “it is through becoming Native... that settler Canadians [could] find salvation, imagine themselves as no longer immigrants, but as becoming Indigenous, recreating sensibilities appropriate to people who really belong here” (115).<sup>66</sup> This process, which involves a “taking-on rather than a putting-down of roots” has proven to be a crucial aspect of English Canadian identity formation, ultimately enabling settlers to “become without becoming”– in short, to gain access to all Indigenous lore, culture, and

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<sup>66</sup> A sentiment still echoed in the words of our national anthem, which proclaim that Canada is “*our* home and native land.”

symbols while still maintaining a place of comfort, status, and superiority (Tuck and Yang 13). And so, in a schizophrenic twist, the Indigenous cultures that Canadian settlers had sought to annihilate were subsumed into, and indeed claimed for, English Canadian culture.<sup>67</sup> Canoes, snowshoeing, lacrosse, inukshuks – many of the symbols that Canadians today think of as being simply “Canadian” – were plucked from various Indigenous cultures throughout the nation, fetishized, and imported into white, middle-to-upper class culture and onto shelves at souvenir shops across the country.

One of the most obvious examples of this is the canoe, “a potent symbol of a particular white, middle-class, central Canadian identity that has been repeatedly grafted onto the nation” (Dunkin 27). In *Canoes and the Nature of Canada*, Bruce Erickson discusses the Canadian canoe fetish, which “resolve[s] the colonial legacy of stolen land” by providing “the nation with what it cannot find in the rational tomes of historical fact – an origin, a place of beginning” (11). The canoe symbolizes the connection between Canadians and “our” land, providing a means to navigate the space of the nation; it typifies the linear path of progress, a journey from nature to civilization (13). As a fetish object, the canoe is also the locus of all the contradictions that cannot be easily resolved on an individual level; it “provides a concrete location for the resolution of this crisis,” which is essentially a crisis of identity for Canadians today who are still struggling to reconcile Canada’s colonial past with our narratives of peace and goodness (8). Pierre

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<sup>67</sup> As Hastings notes: “the Native advances the nationalist narrative by reminding Canadians how the inexorable march of civilization shapes the nation. The historical presence of the Native furnishes Canada with a unique pre-history that predates European colonization. His (or her) importance is thus entirely symbolic; while the native’s image has a place in the nation’s future, the Native himself (or herself) does not” (137).

Elliot Trudeau, with his famous buckskin jacket (which is now on display at the Canadian Canoe Museum) and penchant for paddling about in canoes, typifies this strange mixture of anxiety and fascination with Indigenous culture. He navigates the space of the canoe – as evidenced in several iconic photographs – in such a confident way that it is easy to forget its actual origins.

The canoes used by voyageurs during the fur trade were almost exclusively Indigenous-made; the crafts were hardy, designed to weather long voyages “between metropole and hinterland” (Dunkin 24). However, in the mid-nineteenth century, the canoe underwent a huge transformation, as “early recreational canoeists took special pains to revision the canoe as a craft worthy of middle-class attention and use.” This process, which Jess Dunkin calls “the whitening of the canoe,” focused “on physical ‘improvements,’ using techniques and materials associated with modernity and civilization” (26) in contrast to the so-called “primitive” crafts of Indigenous canoe building (that Indigenous peoples had, nonetheless, been using safely and successfully for hundreds of years). As this 1914 account attests:

While it is true that we must credit the redskin with the invention of the thin-skinned craft... there has been a marked evolution... The white man, with inherent ingenuity, has devoted time, thought, and much money to the work of evolving a substitute for the bark covering, one that would possess its meritorious features, and also add those lacking in the original. (Sangster qtd in Erickson 107)

Because it was not a European creation, the canoe was inherently “deficient,” despite the fact that the newly-engineered manufacturing techniques actually took much of the skill out of canoe-building (Erickson 92). The white man’s canoe, “sprung from his inherent rationality,” modernized what was seen as an “anachronistic vehicle” belonging to a bygone era (108). As such, taking up the canoe as a Canadian symbol was not seen as robbery but as the resurrection of an archaic and outmoded craft much in need of modernization.

This narrative of progress and development underpinning early Canadian-Indigenous relations is similarly evident in lacrosse, which also suffered a process of British “improvement.” Originally based on the sacred ritual of baggataway (or *tewaarathon*) practiced by Algonquin and Iroquoian peoples, it was adopted as “Canada’s” sport in the late nineteenth century, after having been standardized and “reduced to rule” (Beers i). In his 1869 pamphlet entitled *Lacrosse: the National Game of Canada*, W.G. Beers<sup>68</sup> states that: “The origin of Lacrosse, like that of the Indian race from whom we derive it, is lost in the obscurity which surrounds the early history of this people; but that it had its first existence in his wild brain is claimed in his own traditions, and entitled to every belief” (1). Beers then goes on to describe the utter “mystery” of its original purpose, expressing his bewilderment at how such a game had developed. In doing so, he suggests that lacrosse was in fact “rescued” from its “savage origins” and transformed into a Canadian sport esteemed for its “manly virtues” and “genuine pluck”

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<sup>68</sup> W. G. Beers (1843-1900), “the father of modern lacrosse,” was an eminent dentist and Canadian nationalist from Montreal.

(xvi). His lengthy description of European conquest, somehow deemed relevant to his discussion of the sport of lacrosse, makes it clear that Indigenous peoples were no match, in any sense, for white men, despite the “perfection of [their] physical nature” (10).<sup>69</sup> This narrative of white supremacy runs throughout Beers’ text, suggesting a transference of power from Indigenous people to their colonial “masters” that was both natural and inevitable. The Canadianization of lacrosse is thus depicted as the triumph of civilization over untamed physical talent: “the Indian never can play as scientifically as the best white players, and it is a lamentable fact that Lacrosse, and the wind for running, which comes as natural to the red-skin as his dialect, has to be gained on the part of the pale face, by a gradual course of practice and training” (viii).

This sense of superiority, which came from imposing and then enforcing a system of rationality in order to gain technical advantage, follows the same logic as the canoe in that it discredits the original in favour of the (white man’s) copy. Canada’s version of lacrosse was no longer a contest of will and skill, but rather a gentleman’s sport that espoused what Gillian Poulter calls “Muscular Christianity and the values of pluck, stamina, discipline, and fair play.” By the end of the nineteenth century, Canadian lacrosse teams were travelling across Europe, playing exhibition matches against Indigenous teams whose “primitive ‘Indianness’ was emphasized with... exotic and colourful uniforms” (55). These European tours, one of the earliest examples of Canadian spectacle and propaganda, helped white Canadians to develop and promote a unique

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<sup>69</sup> A perfection that could, however, be nullified by Firewater, which supposedly “undermined [their] manliness” (Beers 10).

identity apart from their British counterparts. These matches also allowed the Canadian players to reaffirm their superiority in a safe, controlled environment. Poulter notes that “their frequent wins over the Indigenous team were ostensible proof that British colonists had ‘conquered’ the savages” (57); certainly, it seemed to prove that the white men had beaten these “savages” at what had once been their own game.

The two examples above followed a clear formula: seize the symbol, make it more sophisticated or palatable for general consumption, and present it as a uniquely (English) Canadian phenomenon. In other cases, however, the symbols were left intact but presented as curiosities or mystical aspects of “our” Indigenous culture. This is the case for totem poles and inukshuks, which have not been altered or melded into Canadian culture but instead mass-produced and put in souvenir shops, airports, and malls across the country. This method of appropriation involves the direct fetishization of Indigenous objects, making the sublime into the profane, the sacred into mundane trinkets that can be purchased at a gift shop (Keohane 63). Regardless of whether such items are produced in cheap plastic or crafted from soapstone, Keohane argues that “they are rendered equally sublime and equally vulgar when they are articulated within the modern economy of desire, consumer capitalism” (62). Marketing Indigenous symbols and artefacts as consumables detracts from their symbolic value by removing them from the realm of the sacred or secret;<sup>70</sup> when we “own” these items, we also have a perceived sense of ownership over the cultures from which they came. Their history is “emptied out” and

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<sup>70</sup> For a further discussion of sacred and secret Indigenous cultural artefacts, see David Garneau’s “Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation,” in which he discusses how Indigenous screen objects serve as a barrier that prevents colonial access, interpretation, and appropriation.

they become detached from their original systems of meaning. In this way, they are rendered harmless and trivial, situated safely within Canada's system of signification.

Canada's fetishization and assimilation of Indigenous culture exemplifies Feuerbach's assertion that contemporary society "prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to the essence" (xiii). We want dreamcatchers above our beds but ignore the nightmare of residential schools; we want to wear mass-produced moccasins but do not support Indigenous craftsmen and artists; we want to watch Disney's *Pocahontas* but cannot sit through Jeff Barnaby's films;<sup>71</sup> we proudly display Indigenous symbols when we host the Olympic Games but refuse to acknowledge land claims and basic rights. The contradictions abound, each seeming more obvious and outrageous than the last. And yet, in today's society of the spectacle, "when images chosen and constructed by someone else have everywhere become the individual's principal connection to the world he formerly observed for himself," such contradictions are less easy to notice, because they are obscured by the "naturalness" that our myths give to such phenomena (Debord, *Comments* 27). When one group more or less controls our dominant narratives, it is possible for the idea of "Canada" to contain many antithetical elements without seeming contradictory because there is an explanation for everything, a false origin or alibi to point to whenever tough questions arise.

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<sup>71</sup> Barnaby is best known for his 2013 film *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, which depicts reserve life and the horrors of residential schools through the eyes of a young Mi'kmaq woman.

### 3.3 *Au Voleur!* Anglicizing French Canada

While English Canada's conquest of Indigenous symbolism and cultures is the most glaring example of appropriation, French Canadians are also quick to point out the aspects of their culture that the English have attempted to "claim" as their own. For instance, many figures from French Canadian history were featured in twentieth century English advertisements, a move which positions French Canadian history not as a separate entity but rather as one aspect of a greater "Canadian" history (Hastings 138). The selection of historical figures featured is important to note: Maisonneuve and Cartier were celebrated in English Canada, while Champlain and Laval appeared more in French Canadian advertisements and pop culture. This is because the latter were responsible for upholding French tradition and society whereas the former were more integral in the formation of English-French relations (139). Maisonneuve and Cartier were symbolically detached from their French roots and taken up into the English Canadian narrative of progress in which "the history of New France was merely a 'prelude' to British rule, 'a romantic preface' to the more significant part of Canadian history" (138). English Canada similarly appropriated the *fleur de lis*, incorporating it into advertisements, brand labels, coats of arms, etc. in order to demonstrate that it no longer represented a threat to, but rather a confirmation of, the broader Canadian identity (138).

Most recently, poutine has been the target of English Canadian appropriation, much to the outrage of many Quebecois who believe it to be a distinctly French Canadian "cultural phenomenon" (Durand 219). Interestingly, until the 1990s, the dish was actually "used to deride the idea that Quebec was a distinct society with a specific culture: poutine, it was argued, demonstrated the province's lack of refinement and its intellectual



and artistic poverty.” Caroline Durand explains how, “just like the popular French spoken in Quebec, poutine was considered an embarrassing and bastardized cultural artefact when compared to an ostensibly more refined European cuisine” (222). However, the dish has since gained more widespread popularity and publicity outside of Quebec, with most major fast food chains (and several dedicated poutine joints, such as Smoke’s Pouterie) now offering it. Although most Canadians who eat poutine recognize its French origins, rarely is this a cause for concern or consideration; it is not seen as a fiercely-protected French symbol, but merely as a dish that the Quebecois first offered before it was subsumed into Canadian gastronomy (which Douglas Coupland identifies as consisting mainly of “concentrated forms of sugar, carbohydrate, fat, and salt” (10-11)).<sup>72</sup>

A final victim of blatant symbolic appropriation by English Canada is none other than what Coupland deems “the symbolic blood of the nation”: maple syrup (70). As Elizabeth Jewett explains, “the long saga of the saccharine elixir predates the existence of Canada itself, and this history is central to a national narrative that recalls and celebrates lived experiences connected to a rural Canadian heritage of food, family, community, and nature.” The dominant narrative surrounding maple syrup revolves around the adoption and integration of Indigenous sugaring practices by white, predominantly French settlers (109). With the support and aid of Indigenous peoples, Quebec would eventually go on to produce 90% of Canada’s maple syrup (Ontario, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia make

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<sup>72</sup> Coupland also mentions Canada’s relationship with Kraft products, particularly Kraft Dinner, which he says, “precisely laser-targets the favoured Canadian food groups: fat, sugar, starch, and salt” (11).

up the other 10%). Of course, greater Canada was not content to allow the French to monopolize this product, but rather, through the institution of a series of policies and regulations, maneuvered maple syrup into Canada's mythology – and market. The Department of Agriculture and the Fédération des producteurs acéricoles du Québec ensured that all maple syrup would be labelled “made in Canada” in addition to bearing the “product of Québec” notice, forging ties and drawing connections that blatantly ignored the Québécois desire for distinction. Even something as simple as the three words “made in Canada” ensures the “saccharine elixir's” place in our national symbology, obscuring its original roots in first Indigenous and then French cultures.

As the examples above demonstrate, English Canada's ongoing and largely inconspicuous (to English Canadians, at least) assimilation of Indigenous and French cultures seeks to both decontextualize and devalue their most treasured symbols by reducing them to commodities that are marketed as “products of Canada.” To use Barthes' terminology, this severs the connection between form and meaning and reattaches the original signifier to a new signified. These cultures are undercut not through elimination or repression, but through repetition and normalization, through constant association with Canada generally rather than with a particular culture within Canada. Myth distorts the origins of these products; they are symbols that have been “stolen and restored,” symbols that, “when [they were] brought back, [were] not put exactly in [their] place” (Barthes 124). Although the original signifiers still exist, they have been tampered with, consciously uprooted and replanted in the mythic Canadian past – a past in which they did not originally appear, at least not in the way that our commercials, advertisements, and product labels might have us believe.

### 3.4 Marketing to a Multicultural Audience

Although signifiers from Indigenous and French cultures still feature heavily in Canada's symbolic landscape, since the implementation of official multiculturalism and widespread changes in society – increasing awareness of Indigenous issues, rising numbers of immigrants, and the fact that most Canadians live in urban rather than rural areas – symbols tied solely to land, heritage,<sup>73</sup> and language have lost much of their former appeal. As such, new mythical symbols have had to be invented in order to overcome regional, linguistic, and ethnic biases in Canada – a task much easier said than done. Ideally, these symbols avoid dredging up past issues and wrongdoings and also create a sort of “one-size-fits-all” nationalism that can be easily adopted to construct a semblance of unity. The power of the spectacle has been a key factor in the dissemination of these new symbols. As commodities replace the relationships between people, filling our daily lives with products, advertisements, and an abundance of media content, it becomes easier for those at the top of the social hierarchy to influence our values, desires, and self-image. The “socially derived model of life's conduct” that is actualized within our societal life demands that all social conduct accord with that model, constantly reinforcing a specific *weltanschauung*, or worldview (Bunyard 297).<sup>74</sup> Everything that we see, do, and believe confirms a set idea of what Canada is or should be, blinding us to the

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<sup>73</sup> The so-called “three founding races.”

<sup>74</sup> I am drawing here from the Debord passage that states: “The spectacle cannot be understood either as a deliberate distortion of the visual world or as a product of the technology of the mass dissemination of images. It is far better viewed as a *weltanschauung* [worldview] that has been actualized, translated into the material realm, a world view transformed into an objective force” (13).

evidence that everything which represents Canada has at some point been “borrowed,” fabricated, or recycled in order to fit within our existing system of myth.

Because we are now living in the age of infinite reproducibility, we witness the “general logoization” of nations, wherein particular national symbols are selected and then mass-produced to remind us at every turn of where we find ourselves (Anderson 182). In contemporary Canada, these symbols are generally not imbued with political significance but rather, as I have suggested above, attempt to convey the inclusive and effectively apolitical nature of Canadian society. The maple leaf, for example, represents the “generic maple species”<sup>75</sup> and was selected in part because it was a “historic symbol in both French and English Canada” that was “easy to draw”<sup>76</sup> (Parkinson n.p.) and more resonant and current than the beaver – an animal that, Colin Coates notes, was slaughtered at an “astonishing” rate throughout much of Canada’s early nationhood due to the fur trade (not exactly the stuff of national pride) (15). The rather uninspiring description on the Canadian government’s website simply states that:

Trees have played a meaningful role in the historical development of Canada and continue to be of commercial, environmental, and aesthetic importance. Maples contribute valuable wood products and sustain the maple sugar industry; they are ideal for promoting Canada as a world leader in the sustainable management of forests. (Canada.ca n.p.)

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<sup>75</sup> Although, ironically enough, Canada’s twenty-dollar banknotes feature Norwegian maple leaves rather than those of the Canadian sugar maple.

<sup>76</sup> This is debatable.

Nowhere in this description is there anything inherently incendiary about the symbol; it appears as a natural element of the Canadian landscape,<sup>77</sup> which is then employed as an indication of Canada's positive standing on the world stage. It is deliberately understated, apparently non-political and unoffensive, yet still integral to Canadian progress, civilization, and success. Issues surrounding logging, land ownership, etc. are quietly detached from the maple as a signifier, permitting it to ascend to mythic status in the official Canadian tale of nation-building.

There are a number of other Canadian symbols wherein the motivation has been liberated from the form, resulting in signifiers that are seemingly innocent, if arbitrary. Symbols like nature (commodified through cottages, national parks, camping gear, etc.), hockey, and Tim Hortons, all of which also function as very lucrative commodities, have avoided association with any particular ethnic or linguistic group and therefore retain a purely "Canadian" connotation, at least on the surface.<sup>78</sup> These types of symbols, whether in popular culture and consumer goods, give material form to intangible qualities that Canadians are said to inherently possess, enabling Canadians to relate to one another through the collective enjoyment of spectacular consumption. However, upon closer inspection, these seemingly banal and innocent symbols and spectacles are actually just reiterations of the same themes that English Canada has long upheld in its version of Canada's national narratives.

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<sup>77</sup> This assumption, however, ignores the fact that it is too cold and dry in western Canada for the sugar maple to prosper – another instance of central Canadians' claim to stand in for the national whole.

<sup>78</sup> Which is, of course, the whole purpose of branding: to instantly evoke particular feelings or associations that are focused on surface-level identifications rather than on real substance.

For instance, the robust, powerful masculinity once exemplified by the Mountie has now been transferred to the Canadian hockey player, one of the few types of “acceptable” heroes in contemporary Canada.<sup>79</sup> These stars, “spectacular representations of living human beings,” liberate us from the banality of our daily lives by serving “as superficial objects that people can identify with in order to compensate for the fragmented productive specializations that [we] actually live” (Debord 25). Every “good little Canadian boy,” our myths proclaim, dreams of playing hockey, of being an NHL star. The hockey player is an interesting type of celebrity because his<sup>80</sup> stardom is closely linked to his physicality but also tempered by a distinctly Canadian humbleness and an easygoing nature, or so our myths proclaim. This is the type of celebrity who would appeal to Canadians: he knows the value of hard work and determination but is not afraid to get a little roughed up on the path to success; he is the reformulation of the individual Mountie, virtuous and strong, hard-nosed yet just.

However, these seemingly wholesome and positive traits bely a much more reprehensible connection between our nation and its favourite game.<sup>81</sup> As Gamal Abdel-Shehid notes, both hockey and Canada, according to the tradition, involve “(white) man’s persistent struggle against the elements, his attempt to carve out a virile masculinist home

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<sup>79</sup> As Moore notes, there is somewhat of a “distaste for heroes or men of real achievement other than hockey players.” The reason for this originates, he postulates, from the land and climate: “There are no heroes in the wilderness. Only fools take risks” (qtd in Cohen 32).

<sup>80</sup> I use this pronoun because women’s hockey is still so woefully underappreciated and underpublicized in Canada.

<sup>81</sup> According to Kidd and MacFarlane: “hockey captures the essence of the Canadian experience in the new world. In a land so inescapably cold, hockey is the dance of life, an affirmation that despite the deathly chill of winter we are alive” (4).

in the midst of a cold and hostile land” (129). A recent poll has shown that 80% of Canadians believe that “hockey is a part of what it means to be Canadian” (Allain 65). I would assert, however, that it is more so a part of what it means to be a typical Canadian-Canadian, which in Kristi Allain’s words means being “primarily white, ostensibly straight, young... able-bodied” and male. For Allain, the biggest issue with our envisioning of hockey is that it “links Canadian national identity to the activities of [these] men and their use of physical violence to dominate apparently less masculine foes” (71). This reiterates and reinvents themes of domination and even colonialism in an environment that has been sanitized of all external influences. When we watch hockey, we watch it as an innocent, if aggressive, sporting event – rarely do we consider the extent to which it re-presents early settler experiences in Canada of fighting through the elements against a variety of Others (namely, Indigenous, French, American or immigrant Others), with the goal of physically crushing their opponents to prove themselves worthy of their position in the new world.

The hockey game as a spectacular event – or pseudo-event – brings people together, at least in appearance, at least for a little while. We relate to one another through the events that take place on the ice, whether or not we ourselves can actually skate; we vicariously feel joy and pain, reveling in the fact that this triumph or loss is shared by thousands of people across the nation. In addition to creating a sense of camaraderie (the pseudo-community), hockey offers Canadians the illusion of choice (which team to cheer for, what players to choose for fantasy leagues, etc.) while still ensuring that we remain fiscally invested in the entertainment industry as a whole. While we are certainly aware of the financial expense of playing, watching, and supporting

hockey in Canada, many Canadians do so willingly because we believe that we are participating in the preservation of our national identity.

While hockey, as a sport, centres more around the event or the idea of the event (attending NHL games, signing children up for minor leagues, watching the playoffs at the local pub with friends), other national symbols take a more understated approach, using inclusive marketing to infiltrate our everyday lives in subtle yet effective ways. Tim Hortons, which began as the entrepreneurial venture of a Toronto Maple Leafs' defenseman and the owner of his favourite donut shop, has become a Canada-wide sensation, to the point where one can hardly think "Canada" without a red-cupped double-double also coming to mind. While there may not be an inherent relationship between donut or coffee consumption and Canadian identity, this connection has been indelibly established through the company's promotion of "a commodified or branded version of Canadian nationalism, one that draws upon established symbols such as the North and hockey to champion both local and national conceptions of community" (Dawson and Gidney 230). Dawson and Gidney attribute the chain's success to "its ability to cater to a broad market, from blue-collar shift workers to middle-class professionals, while maintaining a populist image" (231).<sup>82</sup> Essentially, Tim Hortons has employed a number of popular Canadian signifiers to draw customers, while situating

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<sup>82</sup> Dawson and Gidney also attribute the franchise's success to its commercials, which "draw on and reinforce existing ideas about Canadian life and society: the simple delights of home, family, and friends; small towns and friendliness; northern climate and Saturday morning at the rink." They state that these commercials, while focusing primarily on "individual acts of consumption," serve to equate Tim Hortons with "an idealized version of Canada [while] also mak[ing] Tim Hortons shops themselves a 'site and source of Canadianness'" (233).



itself as a signifier for Canada more generally – and one that does not discriminate based on ethnicity, language, or religion.

Tim Hortons presents to us a world devoid of negativity, where the biggest decisions we have to make are whether to get our usual single-double or splurge for a cappuccino; it offers a range of inconsequentially diverse options, allowing individuals to feel like they are making choices that enable self-expression (as much as one's favourite muffin can be deemed "self-expression") without compromising their Canadianness.<sup>83</sup> It is of little consequence, apparently, that Tim Hortons is now blatantly copying Starbucks' practice of infinitely customizable menu options; as long as it retains its position as "Canada's" coffee and donut shop, the franchise can go about delivering Canada's coffee and donuts practically any way it wants. In fact, it is because Tim Hortons has achieved hegemonic status in Canada (at least in the mythical version of our nation, wherein only snobs and Americans drink Starbucks<sup>84</sup>) that it is able to branch out and explore potential areas for expansion – it is safe because it is a well-loved and frequently-patronized national institution.

Although Dawson and Gidney contend that the donut is not representative of Canadian identity, I would argue to the contrary. Just as the typical donut lacks a centre, so too does this most recent iteration of Canadian identity, which seems to escape the old

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<sup>83</sup> As Debord attests: "Behind the glitter of the spectacle's distractions, modern society lies in thrall to the global domination of a banalizing trend that also dominates it at each point where the most advanced forms of commodity consumption have seemingly broadened the panoply of roles and objects available to choose from" (38).

<sup>84</sup> Michael Ignatieff's Starbucks cup was even used against him during the 2011 election as proof that he was "elitist and out of touch with mainstream Canada" (Dawson and Gidney 233).

tropes and issues which plagued the pre-millennial nation by instead drawing attention to the constellation of sweeter, more “spectacular” symbols and myths encircling this absence. It is this centre-less-ness, this lack – supposedly displaced and made manifest again in the form of a Timbit – that we should be most wary of. Indeed, upon a closer examination of this Canadian confection, what has been really been removed from the conversation and put “elsewhere” is our nation’s history of white, English Canadian dominance and all of the issues that stem from this dynamic. Such an “absence” is necessary for the whole to exist because it removes any evidence of our unsavoury past (and present) from our collective national identity. By separating part from whole, particular from universal, and people from past, Canada is able to present a fictitious image in which there is no hierarchy, no privilege, and certainly no oppression.

### 3.5 “Stolen and Restored”

As Canada has proven time and time again, because there is no fixity in mythical concepts, it is possible to shift and adapt longstanding narratives to suit specific situations, to create an identity that can easily adjust to incorporate new elements as needed. This project of adaptation has been particularly ambitious throughout the last several decades: brazenly turning a source of national disgrace into a wellspring for “native” and “natural” Canadian traits; subsuming Quebecois culture into general Canadian culture through marketing and branding; presenting a pastiche of “unbiased” and empty signifiers that replaces depth with surface to give the appearance of inclusivity. Because of the capriciousness of myth and the extent to which it has infiltrated our national symbol bank, our narratives, and indeed our very consciousnesses,

it can be very difficult to see the extent to which we have been interpolated into this system of hegemony.

Canadian spectacle, as a means of myth transmission, manifests “as an enormous positivity, out of reach and beyond dispute.” It proclaims that: “Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear” (Debord 15). All that we are required to do is passively accept this goodness in all its forms by engaging in the activities and purchasing the products that are representative – and thus constitutive – of Canada. Because these various forms of representation direct our social activities and ideals, they become real in the sense that they concretely affect the lives and activities of Canadians across the nation (regardless of whether or not we are aware of their effects). Many Canadians therefore take up the various aspects of contemporary Canadian culture unquestioningly, feeling constantly affirmed in the “celebration of a choice already made” (13), a choice which dictates to us how we show and live our Canadianness. Everything we see, buy, and consume is carefully designed to protect the existing structures in place by promoting a specific iteration of the “Canadian way of life.”<sup>85</sup>

The “one-size-fits-all” mentality that governs our new symbolic system offers what appears to be a means of acceptance for anyone who comes to or lives in Canada. And yet, as Debord explains, the spectacle always tries to “[preserve] the old culture in congealed form, going so far as to recuperate and rediffuse even its negative

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<sup>85</sup> As Debord says, the spectacle in both form and content “serves as total justification for the conditions and aims of the existing system” – it works to confirm rather than challenge the status quo by constantly supplying proof of the dominance and totality of the extant system (13).

manifestations.” This is done with the aim of “promot[ing] reconciliation with a dominant state of things from which all communication has been triumphantly declared absent” (136). Essentially, the absence of traditional English Canadian values from the current symbols and products in Canada today reflects not the extinction of these values, but their transcendence. Rather than recognizing this, however, we often fall prey to the illogical logic of myth; we simplify and tautologize, forgetting or ignoring the prior circumstances that have produced the conditions for our current society to exist as it does.

To combat this, we must remember that Canada is the result of generations’ worth of myths, memories, stories, and lived experiences – many of which do not comply with the dominant narratives that structure our society today. We must engage in concerted effort on a collective level to effectively disrupt and destabilize the mythopoetic processes in Canada, to strip the spectacles that dazzle us with flashy images and flattering words of their hypnotic allure. When the symbols and spectacles that represent Canada are revealed not as naturally-existing elements but as pawns of English Canada’s regime, they will inevitably be forced out of sight, banished into the depths of our mythical memory. While this eviction does not mean that English Canada will necessarily relinquish these symbols for good, it does mean that these signifiers will be liberated from their unwilling role in upholding Anglo-Canadian hegemony; it also means that they will have the chance regain their historicity, their origins, and their significance. Thus, it is only by questioning that which is taken for granted and highlighting the inaccuracies and flaws within Canada’s mythic landscape that what has been stolen might finally be restored to its rightful home.

## Conclusion

Throughout this project, I have focused on three key elements of Canadian myth that have been used over time to construct our national identity: our stories, our stereotypes, and our symbols. In examining how these three aspects of myth-production interact to signify and explain the idea of “Canada,” it has been my goal to disentangle nature and history, which have been too often conflated throughout Canada’s past. By incorporating a wide range of examples from Canadian history and society, I hope to have demonstrated how Canada’s myths have developed and how they have enabled Canadians to construct a unique sense of self that sets “us” apart from all the other “them’s” in the world: our national identity. The point of this national identity is to enable us to foster community and find meaning, to feel like we are sharing in something greater than ourselves; it also gives us the opportunity to imagine ourselves as a part of the nation in a way that (supposedly) supersedes race, gender, class, and ethnicity. I emphasize “imagine” because, despite its idealistic goals, national identity does not and cannot truly overcome these dividing factors – that is simply a myth that those in power perpetuate to justify their own nationalist attitudes and activities. Displays of nationalism might create the appearance of unity, but they ultimately cannot supersede the many rifts between individuals in a lasting and meaningful way.

Why does national identity even matter, then, if it is not something that genuinely brings people together? I believe it is because nationalism is largely inescapable – all people, whether they actively notice it or not, are constantly surrounded and influenced by the myths of the nation they inhabit. Although living in Canada and being or feeling “Canadian” are not one and the same, there is a lot of overlap in the sense that, while

living in Canada, a person will be exposed to Canadian news, policies, media, weather, and people. And, while each person living in Canada will interpret its stories, symbols, and spectacles differently (most Ontarians would view the Canadian flag with pride while Quebecers and Indigenous people might oscillate between indifference, resentment, and outright anger), it is undeniable that these phenomena have a concrete effect on how we choose and are able to live our lives. The products that are available to us, the places we can travel, the taxes we pay, and the people who live next door (while these factors might differ from province to province) are all direct results of the fact that we are in Canada and nowhere else in the world.

Many of the effects of our national identity are so banal and minute that they often go unnoticed, which is why some might broadly claim that having a national identity is no longer important. I would argue, however, that this simply shows the level to which national identity has been naturalized and banalized, such that its pervasive presence is no longer immediately evident. We are not aware of how we are influenced by our national identity because it seems either natural (for English Canadians or “Canadian-Canadians” who have grown up within the hegemonic centre and therefore do not have to regularly assert or defend their positionality) or inconsequential (for “Others” in Canada who reject the dominant discourses and therefore feel themselves to be outside or above the limits of Canada’s national identity). This is a testament to myth’s power and prevalence in our society, as well as to its ability to turn history into nature and identity into inherence. Throughout this project, it has been my goal to demythologize Canada by attempting to denaturalize the beliefs that so many of us have about our

nation.<sup>86</sup> While some may argue that this is not a desirable goal, as it endangers the nation's "cohesiveness" and clout, I believe that my efforts to demythologize are only "dangerous" to those in positions of power who do not want to highlight a past they would much rather do away with altogether. I also believe that it is important to educate, and in the process, unsettle, those who feel most secure and at home in Canada, because it is these people who unknowingly perpetuate the myths that both obscure and permit ongoing structural inequalities and oppression.

While this process of demythologization might spell the end of Canada "as we know it," as it turns out, we never really "knew" Canada in the first place. Our nation, adrift in the currents of modernity, has never been able to create a genuinely stable or enduring identity. Instead, it has had to "undertake the process of nation formation urgently, visibly, defensively" (Bennett et al. qtd in Mackey 22), resorting to Machiavellian and even Orwellian methods at times to unify a rather scattered bunch of people who have very little in common. As such, by stripping Canada of its myths, we are actually giving it something back: its history. And, by restoring Canada's history, we can also restore the knowledge and accountability that has been lost throughout the revision process. Although this does not necessarily represent a solution for Canada's many ailments and issues, it would certainly help us to approach these problems from a more knowledgeable, critical position. When we understand the relationship between past and present, we see the world not as a constellation of naturalized relations but as a series

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<sup>86</sup> While all countries are, to an extent, mythologized, Canada's case is unique in the sense that our current identity stands in direct contrast to all former iterations of Canadian identity, a point which goes largely unnoticed because of the way in which we have continually revised our history to affirm our present.

of causes and effects; we can therefore better understand the weight of our own actions and decisions. I believe that it is only with a knowledge of our past and a suspicion of “what-goes-without-saying” that we will have the opportunity to liberate the history that lies beneath what has been made “natural,” to restore what has been stolen to its rightful place. By looking at our nation and its past objectively rather than succumbing to the barrage of stories, symbols, and spectacles, Canadians just might break free of the (signifying) chains that have for so long shackled us to the idea, the myth, of the place we call “our home and native land.”

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*“Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.”*

*(Orwell)*



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