
RETHINKING CANADIAN CULTURE AS PART OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

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Abstract: In my paper I have analysed the process of becoming Canadian based on historical data and cultural politics in order to connect this diachronic perspective to the present day society's perception in terms of ethnicity, nationalism, social status and gender. The main aim is to demonstrate how divergent trends and ideas have been shaping Canadian identity during their competition for ascendancy, in search of answers to the question of a regulating official ideology in a multicultural state. The forms of national and cultural representations have a political foundation that cannot escape controversial attitudes at the social life level, given the complexity of societal issues under debate. The collective struggles around them are meant to redefine cultural politics with its specific values in the hope to meet the expectations of the nation-state identification in the world. The discursive actions that I have focused on in my research work are a living proof of the dynamic and continual re-production of national identity in Canada, at the same time creating and also unifying diversity. The long debated racial commonality of French and English is another point of interest in joining components of nationality in theorising national culture. From this angle, non-Canadian people like me can understand better and more deeply Canadians' struggle to keep the distinction clear between American and Canadian culture while continually asserting their national identity.

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The Canadian Identity, as it has come to be known, is as elusive as the Sasquatch and Ogopogo. It has animated—and frustrated—generations of statesmen, historians, writers, artists, philosophers, and the National Film Board... Canada resists easy definition. (Andrew Cohen 2007: 3).

If we think again and again why it is difficult to define Canadian identity in relation to its national culture, the analysis can only be subjective and selective due to the many reasons one may find. Realising this at an early stage of my research into the topic, I have decided to confine it to the major issues I am already dealing with, from the perspective of a European. To Canadians themselves, such standpoint is a look from outside their country, an insight into what we generally think it means to be Canadian and what is the impact of their culture to our consciousness. Starting from the uniqueness of Canada both as history, ethnical composition, cultural and linguistic diversity, this portrait is a very special one in the entire world, since I primarily focus on its distinctiveness from other countries it is often compared to, such as the United States. The result of the geographic position and historic heritage, Canadian identity is roughly considered shaped by three traditional factors: the British, French-English conflict and American ones. In the 20th century, immigrants of Asian, African and Caribbean nationalities have gradually shaped Canadian identity, a process that even today continues with the ongoing coming of immigrants in large numbers from either non-British or non-French backgrounds, which supplements the issue of multiculturalism to the analysis. Most debates over Canadian identity in contemporary times are mainly in political terms, defining Canada as a country guided by government policies that reflect cultural values. Other nations have also questioned their identity in recent years. Ethnicity is relevant to identification in connection with other concepts such as ethnic groups and ethnic identity. Canada is

therefore religiously and linguistically diverse, many dialects being spoken while beliefs and customs are preserved. These days, Canada has a diverse composition of nationalities and ethnicities as well as governmental policies promoting multiculturalism and interculturalism rather than cultural assimilation or a unified national myth. In Quebec, cultural identity seems stronger, many scholars considering Quebec culture as being distinguished from the English Canadian culture. In Canada, the large range of aboriginal, regional, and ethnic subcultures create a cultural mosaic. Wsevolod Isajiw in *Definition and Dimensions of Ethnicity: A Theoretical Framework* examines what national identity is and how it relates to concepts such as nation, race, ethnic groups, and nationalism. Throughout Canada's history, its culture has had a massive influence of European traditions, particularly French and British, and also of its own indigenous cultures. Over time certain elements specific of Canada's immigrant populations culture have been integrated into the mainstream Canadian culture. Population has also received the influence of American culture because of sharing the same language, as well as for the proximity and migration between these two countries (Isajiw 1992:5).

Canada is often characterised as a very diverse, progressive, and multicultural state. Its Government policies are social indicators of Canada's political and cultural values. Canada's federal government has had a great impact on Canadian culture with the programs and laws developed over time, protecting it by establishing legal minimums concerning Canadian content in mass media through institutions such as Canadian Radio-Television. As to the development of Canadian culture, this is an ongoing process closely connected to history. Canadian literature is an expression of both national identity and culture in the sense that many writers have addressed such issues. It is basically divided into French and English-language literatures, following the literary traditions of Britain and France. Canada's literature, whether in French or English, gives a glimpse of Canadian perspective on the country's position in the world, wilderness, regionalism, frontiers. Bliss Carman's poetry and the memoirs of Susanna Moodie and Catherine Parr Traill are vivid examples that have inspired successive generations of writers, from Leonard Cohen to Margaret Atwood. Kretzer analysis of Anglophone literature highlights how nationalism and national identity are reflected:

We must continue studying how the nation is imagined: how it defines a body of writing as national; how it informs and validates that literature; how its clashing loyalties impassion citizens for good or ill; how it convokes and disperses communities; how it invokes and subverts the ideal of heroism; how it foresees a fusion of personal and social satisfactions (joy and justice); and how it gives a mission to literary criticism, including the mission to denounce nationalism in its vicious forms (Kretzer 1998:195).

Starting with the mid-twentieth century, Canadian writers have looked into national themes for their readership. They tried to find a distinct Canadian voice in original writings, often regional since Canadian identity is closely connected to its literatures. The theme of national identity is a constant one, from Hugh MacLennan's *Two Solitudes* (1945) to Alistair MacLeod's *No Great Mischief* (1999). However, Canadian literature is not only categorised by historic and literary period of respective writings by also by province or region or by the socio-cultural origins of writers. We can regard Canadians as characters in the novels of

Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence, and Robertson Davies, the plays of Michel Tremblay, or the stories of Roch Carrier, Stephen Leacock's humour or the history of Donald Creighton. The question of the nation belonging sense at borderland appears in Michael Ondaatje's (1992) *The English Patient*. "Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states" (Ondaatje 1992:138).

Margaret Atwood has a huge contribution to defining national identity of Canada, not only in non-fiction works, but also in novels. Many of them, such as *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, *Alias Grace*, *The Blind Assassin* and *Surfacing*, can be called "Historiographic Metafiction" according to the definition of the postmodern literary theorist Linda Hutcheon. Therefore, Atwood regards Canadian literature as representative for Canadian national identity, expressed as relationship with nature, settlers history and adherence to the community. The garrisons image surrounded by wilderness as Northrop Frye describes Canada is similar in theory to the imagery in Atwood's *Wilderness Tips*: there are trees that are "hardly trees; they are currents of energy, charged with violent colour" (Atwood 1991:129). Canadian writers have been inspired by Canada's particular geography and climate to primarily adopt the theme of survival. *Surfacing* is one of Atwood most popular novels in Canada focusing on this productive topic.

Surfacing and Survival contribute to national discussions in Canada in a couple of well-known ways: from the integral link between Atwood's and Northrop Frye's writing to the ambiguous relationship between Canadians and Americans in Surfacing, these books have proven to be important to debates about Canadian identity and belonging (Dobson 2009: 27).

It is also one of the most poetic novels she has written, by association with her poetry for having "a considerable thematic and stylistic territory" (Sherrill 1980: 97). This can be explained by the complex imagery and metaphors, expanding the theme of *The Edible Woman* about the female protagonist's alienation from social expectations, in a context created by a combination of issues related to ecology, nationalism and ancestry. These concerns were newly integrated in the feminist theory. Atwood combines feminism, ecology and nationalism to treat their common theme: guilt versus innocence. The reading of this novel is undoubtedly culture specific. Nationalism and feminism interact around autonomy and identity. The fight for autonomy is extended beyond sexual politics as Atwood addresses Canada's struggle to escape cultural domination by America. She often refers to notions of ideological imperialism, saying: "what we have done in this country is to use imported gods like imported everything else" (Atwood quoted in Graeme Gibson, *Dissecting the Way a Writer Works*: 19). This novel can be read as the double problematic of myth and national identity. Between myths and Freudian symbolism, this is a story of inadequacy and guilt which have manifestations such as revolt, isolation and despair, in the context of a degenerate contemporary civilization. This is in stark contrast to wilderness and simple life and also a parody of traditional romantic love that becomes obscenity in the new dimension of human experience, especially the female one. The stereotypical male "straight power" has "no conscience or piety" (Atwood 2003a: 127-128). Indeed, as Atwood writes in the introduction to *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English*: "we gave up a long time ago trying to isolate the gene for Canadianness" (1995:xiii). The concept of Canadianness and the

perennial Canadian question of national identity are related to the myths and stereotypes: the canoe, wilderness, frontier with America, unity between English and French Canada. Daniel Francis explains the notion of “myth” in his book *National Dreams*, where he states that “...myths are not lies, or at least, not always” (Francis 1997: 16). He has studied some of the Canadian myths and also the history behind the formation of them and I address the topics in his book as the main sources producing examples of Canadian myths for this study. “*Surfacing* is a deeply ambiguous and ambivalent book” (Dobson 2009: 28), with four main characters. The narrator is an unnamed woman, having a partner called Joe. They travel together with another couple, Anna and David, by car, to rural Quebec where the narrator’s parents’ home was until her father went missing mysteriously. “I can’t believe I’m on this road again” she says (Atwood 2003a: 1). The narrator does not give details to her companions, keeping for herself all the suppositions she makes and subsequently, trying to interpret her father’s sketches of Indigenous rock drawings and maps of the lakes in that regions. A number of tensions are revealed, both trans-national (between the Canadians and Americans) and intra-national (between the French and the English in Quebec on one hand, and between the Canadians and Indigenous people on the other hand). The narration is full of reference to the unnamed woman’s past, that she has not been Joe’s partner for a long time and she is uncomfortable with her own body, maybe because of the aborted child. A shift in the course of the narration occurs when her actual external search becomes more and more inward. Once with the sexist attitudes of men in her group and their trips into the wilderness, she begins to dissociate herself from them and from civilization, as a reaction to all that she dislikes or even hates in her life. The rhetoric of Canadian wilderness identity aligns with the current discourses of postmodernism and identity politics. In the novel, there are several references to jars, bottles and tin cans. These items represent methods of containing or imprisoning life: “I put the worms in a can and some dirt for them”. They also represent the narrator's own emotional life which has been put into jars preventing her from being able to feel. The narrator seeks to regain her connection with archaic feminine wisdom, symbolized in the text by her mysterious mother. Her Father is also remembered as he was alive. In her mysterious powers, the mother is aligned with nature, hence after her death, the narrator sees her as a bird: “I squint up at them, trying to see her, trying to see which one she is” (ibid. 176). She is innocent, and consequently, like the slaughtered heron, a victim. The narrator concludes that: “The innocents get slaughtered because they exist” (ibid. 121-122). The use of simplified stereotypes, as for example “the loud American” and “the Canadian canoe/wilderness” constitutes an effective method that deals with issues concerning national identity. It has been often been suggested that anti-Americanism has primacy in Canadian nationalist ideologies. A close reading of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* produces several examples of American stereotypes as opposed to the Canadian ones. The image of Americans as loud and obnoxious is shown by the way in which they approach with their boat; “it rounds a point and becomes a roar, homing in on us, big powerboat, the white water veeing from the bow” (ibid. 60). The fact that the Americans have a big powerboat, and later they are described wearing “nifty outfits” points to the stereotype picture of Americans as wealthy people who show off. Further stereotypes appear in the passage where the Americans are described as being wasteful and disrespectful of regulations. “They’re the kind who catch

more than they can eat and they'd do it with dynamite if they could get away with it" (ibid. 60).

Americanism that the narrator associates with technology, violence and destruction is the opposite of Nature, her refuge, which strangely leads to her ambivalent rejection of and likely return to society in the last parts of the novel because her clear divisions between what is pure and what is contaminated break down. As Donna Gerstenberger clearly states:

Atwood has left us in this novel more than a sociological record; there are here hieroglyphics by which human beings may find their ways beyond the old confining myths of nurture. She has engaged our attention at the levels of myth and language in a way that enlarges our conceptual horizons we should examine our world a little differently because we have experienced Surfacing (Gerstenberger 1976: 148-49).

The novel shows this disruption of differences, in all ethical classifications. First she labels all that is negative as American, in contrast to a seeming pure Canadian society, gradually elements of American corruption penetrate the Canadian sphere, both as border crossing and symbolically. The narrator meets a hunter named Bill Malmstrom, who expresses his intention to buy her property for a group of Detroit-based outdoorsmen, the "Wildlife Protection Association of America," whose desire to kill animals reveals her anti-American biases. The narrator and her companions meet a pair of fishermen in a remote wild place while searching for her missing father, and assume from their appearance that they are Americans: "They had a starry flag like all of them, a miniature decal sticker on the canoe bow. To show us we were in occupied territory" (ibid. 115). They had killed a heron for no apparent reason, which made the narrator believe that "it must have been the Americans" who did it. The needlessly murdered heron comes to symbolize the victimization of the innocent, which is a theme that appears throughout the text. "I couldn't tell how it had been done, bullet, smashed with a stone, hit with a stick... They must have got it before it had time to rise" (ibid. 110). This image speaks of the cruelty of the "civilized" people against nature and the innocent. Actually, this idea is a continuation of the statement from the beginning of the novel: a "disease is spreading up from the South" and David calls them "the fascist pig Yanks", a very strong anti-American attitude.

To understand the Canadian cultural map was one of the central concerns in the time when Atwood came to prominence, being well-known that she promotes a politics of national identification in her writing:

If Atwood's vision of Canadian resistance in Surfacing requires untangling, however, it is in part because her protagonist's openness to difference is limited to that which is already within Canada. If the transnational now informs how literature in Canada conceptualizes itself, then cross-border influences may need to be thought differently. The problems that Surfacing has in maintaining its divisions between Canada and the United States illustrate the very conscious limitations of its vision, at the same time as it projects an ideal, imagined community. (Dobson 2009: 37).

Since Quebec was so distinct, the marks of Americanization are expected to be much more visible than in English Canada. The narrator finds everywhere signs that the Quebec of her childhood has been violated by Americans and also by the Canadians who have assimilated the American values of material progress and disastrous ecological destruction:

the road to the village is straightened and shortened, the gas station is decorated with stuffed moose (a possible representation of the narrator's family in her youth), one of them waving an American flag and the village's economy only depends on catering to American holiday fishermen, businessmen in plaid shirts still creased from the cellophane packages and wives, if they come, who sit in two's on the screened blackfly-proof porches of the single-room cabins and complain to each other while the men play at fishing (Atwood 2003a: 10). At the beginning, the narrator assumes, just like David did, that the Americans are easy to identify in the wilderness. They are the ones who scare away the fish, break the game laws by catching far more than they can eat, and who always want all camping equipment to be automatic and collapsible. But in northern Quebec, Americanism does not reveal itself in terms of nationality, but as a state of mind. When the narrator's companions and the Ontario fishermen mistake each other for Americans, she realizes something quite obvious: it is impossible in North America to be non-American: "If you look like them and talk like them and think like them you are them ... you speak their language, a language is everything you do" (Atwood 2003a: 95). This is a kind of cathartic confirmation of the truth about her past. In terms of a cognitive mapping of the transnational space, the relationship between Canada and the USA may be regarded as a threat within the context of national debates:

[...] Canadians could always partake in the commercial-popular culture of the American West, they also had to reckon with their own West, Canadian myths of the frontier, the West and the North, and their close, one-sided political and economic relationship with the U.S. (Francis 1997: 77).

The American frontier motif is read as an aggressive and colonizing compulsion, associated with the quest and contrasting with the Canadian survival motif, which is suggestive of passivity and victimization. "The pervasive menace, the Americans" (ibid. 139). The Canadians are "struggling to differentiate their identity from that of Americans" (ibid. 60). The Canadian Multiculturalism Act reevaluates the meaning of Canadian identity.

The forces of continentalization continue to increase, yet Canadian culture remains - and, I believe, will remain - distinct and distinctive, the reflection of our unique sensibilities. (Gould, Karen L, Gaffield Chad 2003:215)

According to Homi Bhabha, who exposes the fluidity and narrativity of national identities that characterises the way in which the nation-space can be best described. Bhabha's qualification of a nation as an edifice of ideological ambivalence as well as his view on the contingency of national meanings make us question the particulars upon which communities envision their borders, suggesting the steady deferral of a definitive national identity. Myths of an existing immutable national consciousness and a possible unified national culture disallow us to fully understand how the "other is never outside or beyond us" (Bhabha 1990: 4), while the cultural map is no longer overlapping the geographical one. This collective inability to comprehend is integral to nation-building and belonging.

"As much as the beaver or the Canada goose or the maple leaf, the canoe is presented as our link to the land, to the past, to our Aboriginal forebears, and to our spiritual roots" (Francis 1997: 129). It has a constant presence in the history and folklore of Canada. As Daniel Francis further asserts:

The canoe, and the story of transformation it embodies, does not belong solely to the Aboriginal people. They are also central emblems of non-Native Canadian culture. [...] the canoe journey into the wilderness has been a consistent theme of our history and our culture (ibid.128).

The canoe, tent and wilderness are all connected, as they speak of typical dimensions of the same world, subordinated to a specific mentality and way of living: “The rhetoric of canoeing reveals that the myth of wilderness continues to exert a strong attraction” (ibid. 149) as a contact with truth and freedom and an encounter with history and discovery of national identity:

The canoe trip is partly an attempt to recapture a past world. It is tinged with nostalgic regret at the loss of a simpler way of life. We believe our ancestors had a more authentic relationships with the natural world; the canoe trip is one means we have of trying to recapture it (ibid. 150).

Again, the canoe is more like a mystical object than a vehicle of ordinary travel. Once embarked, people experience a revelation of their ancestral heritage bond and a feeling of belonging to both the visible and invisible world.

The trip by canoe is also dangerous and it requires a lot of skill, as any close interaction with nature and wildlife:

Neither of them had portaged before; we had to help them lift and balance the canoes. I said maybe they should double up, both of them under one canoe, but David insisted they could do it the real way. I said they should be careful; if the canoe slipped sideways and you didn't get out in time it would break your neck. (Atwood 2003a: 83)

In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye reads the wilderness as a pastoral space of renewal and redemption, of “escape from society” (Frye 1985: 43). Frank Davey was obviously following the same pastoral pattern traced by Frye when he described *Surfacing* as a comedy “which begins in social disruption, sends its characters into a healing ‘green world’, and returns them to society capable of restoring it to wholeness”. The quest reading of the novel remains the most popular, although different critics use it to different ends. Carol P. Christ, for example, emphasizes the spiritual aspects of the journey, and argues that in order to achieve spiritual enlightenment, the narrator “must choose the isolation of the visionary quest”. Christ 1995: 120). The quest genre is based on the belief that the heroine can escape society and find self-definition in isolation, and as such, it is deeply rooted in a liberal concept of the self. By beginning *Surfacing* with a travel into the wilderness, Atwood takes her rightful place within the quest narratives tradition and enriching it with a new spiritual dimension. Ostensibly, the narrator’s search for her father becomes a quest for her missing memories, which are the connection knot between her past and to her true self, in an attempt to find isolation since the trauma of an abortion made her regard the society as a dangerous place, characterized by aggression and violence, where “there is nothing inside the happy killers to restrain them” (Atwood 2003a: 122), and the narrator does not perceive herself as an agent, as a searcher as well as a survivor and a victim.

Atwood argued that “every country or culture has a single unifying and informing symbol at its core”, which she identified as The British Island (a “sense of security”), The American Frontier (a “sense of adventure or danger”), and for Canada, survival:

Our stories are likely to be tales not of those who made it but of those who made it back ... The survivor has no triumph or victory but the fact of his survival; he has little after his ordeal that he did not have before, except gratitude for having escaped with his life. (Atwood 2003b:33).

The themes of authenticity and recognition permeate the entire novel. One of the concerns of the narrator is to discover the values that are real or indigenous to her as a female, as a Canadian and as an individual in order to become a “natural woman” (Atwood 2003a: 184).

The narrator’s flight into the wilderness is an attempt to escape her entrapment within social guilt and recover her authentic, innocent self. The notion of an authentic self is minutely described by Taylor who deconstructs the modern ideal of authenticity, by analyzing the tremendous shift in belief from an external and divine morality to an internal moral truth that must be protected against adverse social influences. Canadian unity is depicted as a myth, in the falsehood sense she shows that two parallel societies exist in Canada. The content of certain statements made by the narrator, or the characters, also add to this conclusion. The protagonist of *Surfacing* exclaims: “This is border country” (Atwood 2003a: 30) while she travels to her childhood home in the wilderness of Canada’s North. She means the division between English and French Canada.

The idea of the Canadians who want to distinguish their identity from that of the Americans’ also exists in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, as in the example were two strangers mistake the protagonist and her friends for Americans. One of the strangers asks: “Say, what part of the States are you all from? It's hard to tell, from your accent". The protagonist replies: “We're not from the States,” I said, annoyed that he'd mistaken me for one of them” (ibid. 122). The protagonist is irritated when she and her company are mistaken for an Americans. It is important for them that their Canadian identity does not merge with the identity of Americans. The narrator is more convinced of the fact that the rational society represented by her father is no more than a destructive force. She comes to believe that masculine culture has subordinated an innocent feminine nature. The lack of connection between characters transfers the situation to an indifference to the natural world that has resulted in the “dying white birches” (Atwood 2003a: 9) in the opening pages, the “fished out” lake (ibid. 32), and the hanged heron (ibid. 137–138). The narrator meditates over life and suffering in a way that is supposed to be illuminating to her:

Anything that suffers and dies instead of us is Christ . . . (ibid. 164–65).

In the novel’s final sentence, “The lake is quiet, the trees surround me, asking and giving nothing” (ibid. 224) is a belief in the force of natural world where the narrator can “begin” and “trust” (ibid. 224). Thus, *Surfacing* stands for a powerful manifest for respect to the sacredness of all life forms of the Earth: “Anything we could do to the animals we could do to each other” (ibid. 143). The parody, irony, metafiction, and intertextuality and the deconstruction of national and social myths are typically postmodern. The ideas in Atwood’s novel are an expression of a strong reaction against the consumerism and disrespect for the natural world that defines urban survival:

Canada, as a country with a complex colonial heritage, becomes a site in which liberation is envisioned through a project of nation-building, one in which it might be possible to identify dominant themes as a means of creating a collective identity. (Dobson 2009: 35).

Although the novel clearly favors nature over civilization, the Surfacers' transformation into the 'natural woman' is still unsettling. Indeed, it becomes difficult to read her transformation, as Atwood relies on images rather than logic to move the narrative forward. This emphasis on the land connects with Northrop Frye's famous pronouncement that the central question of Canada is not "Who am?" but "Where is here?" (Frye 1985: 220). She then makes her famous claim about refusing to be a victim, about taking responsibility. Atwood's work has been consistently seen as referring to the world around her, whether that world is specifically associated with Canada, or whether it is more concerned with contemporary gender relations or with other political positions. *Surfacing* is best read as a quest narrative, and again therefore dismisses it from further consideration. Generally, Canadian literature reflects the relationship between national identity and culture, as this issue still is under scrutiny.

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