

Book Review

Howard A. Doughty and Mariono Tuzi, editors
Discourse and Community: Multidisciplinary Studies in Canadian Culture
Toronto: Guernica, 2007

Reviewed by Eleanor Glor

This book is a gem full of insights about Canadian experience, many of them applicable at one level or another to global experience today. It combines five literary and cultural studies with three social and political studies.

The literary and cultural essays reveal social dynamics of their times. Susan Ellis studies Catharine Parr Traill to uncover the challenges faced and solutions chosen by an English middle class woman in the Canadian wilderness doing work previously defined as that of working class women and men.

Ches Skinner examines the Canadian army entertainers, The Dumbells, as an expression of Canada's transition from colonial to independent political status after World War I. This international troupe originally formed by the Canadian military, continued to entertain for 12 years after the war.

Douglas Bailie expresses the role of unions during the Depression in Canada through the rearguard Luddite action fought by musicians as the "talkies" replaced both silent movies and vaudeville in theatres across Canada. Gordon Hatt reflects Canada's social and economic transformations and emerging cynicism through a study of Toronto visual artist Lisa Neighbour's work in the late 1980s and the 1990s.

Canada's transition from a nation focused on the common good to self-absorptive individualism is evident in Brian Flack's essay. He asserts the need for Canadian literature to escape the stereotyped, romantic vision of Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood, Canada's most famous contemporary literary writers, to reflect an urban, ego- and power-based literature. No longer should literature define Canadians by their relationship to their land; rather, we need to achieve a change of consciousness on a large scale and develop complete control of ourselves.

These five literary and cultural studies guide us through many Canadian struggles—that of colonial middle class women defining acceptable new roles; Canadian entertainers who are the best but emerging from a colonially defined identity, musicians trying to preserve both their jobs and live Canadian entertainment in face of the onslaught of new American entertainment technology; a visual artist incorporating immigrant culture and religious images of suffering into high art; and attempts to create an individualist urban Canadian identity in face of enforced urbanization.

The social and political studies also reflect Canadians' struggles, most of them ultimately unsuccessful, but leaving a nation not yet so defeated that there cannot be another call to

political action. Michael Welton's research on Canadian workers' education reflects the struggles working people had creating the knowledge, skills, solidarity and identity necessary to achieve any real power. Diane Meaghan's survey of 37 homeless women in Toronto during the late 1990s, supplemented by secondary sources, reveals their struggles, created by individual, but even more by government, action and inaction.

Howard Doughty details famous international Canadian contributors to modern culture and technology, especially the arts and entertainment, and contrasts the visibility of their profiles to the obscurity of Canadian intellectuals. Doughty identifies the Canadian fixation on professional sport and entertainment as a means to evade serious public issues and supports Northrop Fry's statement in *Letters in Canada* (1952), that Canada is almost the only pure colony remaining: colonial in psychology and mercantile in economics. Canada is essentially conservative, dominated by the dynamism of American technology.

This argument leads Doughty to a discussion of the thinking of social critic and literary theorist Arthur Kroker of the University of Calgary. Kroker suggests we are caught in an electronic cage, where "technology comes alive, acquires organicity, and takes possession of us." (Like Marshall McLuhan, Kroker makes up words.) We, in turn, experience a great shutting down of experience. Although caught up in a veneer of technological dynamism, our inner reality has become one of inertia, exhaustion and disappearances.

Direct experience is being replaced by simulacra; digital communication leads to abandonment of chronology, pattern and coherence. While our stories and memories constitute useful fiction that serves as equipment for living, this is not true for sampler music or manic art. Manic art of dispersion and retrieval marks the dissolution and cancellation of the social field. A euphoria of technological fetishism leads only to re-visitation of the territory of remembered, distorted objects.

Sampler music, sampler genetics, sampler politics, sampler economics and sampler strategies for environmental survival lead to judgmental agnosticism. When this ethic (or is it a religion?) seeks to erase specific boundaries, or denies the legitimacy of boundaries, it becomes monstrous. Our culture is degenerating. We no longer care about the deprivation of others, we have no definition of the good, especially the public good. We lack a mechanism for creating commonly shared ideas, such as the workers' education outlined earlier in the book. Technological acceleration is accompanied by a shutting down of ethical perception. As the western world was absorbed with the release of Windows 95, the UN allowed the destruction of one of its safe havens at Srebrenica, Yugoslavia. Bosnian Muslims could be ethnically cleansed because they were first technologically cleansed—they were surplus to world domination in a cyber-box.

What is to be done? A big baseball fan, Doughty suggests that as a preliminary step, the masses must be dissociated from professional sports franchises as the loci of their deep political loyalty and from seeing lotteries as the solution to the gap between poverty and wealth. Thought must be given to revolutionary intellectual work since the grand theories of social life and social change are perceived through slogans. Survival of the fittest must

be overcome, or Jacobinism (expressed in the French Revolution) and capitalism will fuse into techno-fascism. Articulating cogent alternatives to neoliberal sophistry and articulating sensible methods is not easy. The task as Doughty sees it is to communicate a theory of power that does not lead to hopelessness.

Some steps can be achieved by dispensing with Platonism [though he does not say why], accepting empirical variations, embracing subversive artistry, and deconstructing the language of power. We must affirm the importance of ideology for the maintenance of social control, of the media and its messages [is Doughty proposing control of the media?], and of free speech. While the Internet is used to organize worldwide demonstrations against globalization, it is also used to track people.

The means of communication are more invasive than ever before. Aspirant policy innovators who seek to involve citizens have two challenges. One is to ensure, at a minimum, access for those affected by a particular choice. The other is to minimize established interests dominating electronic discussion by controlling who has access and by deciding what government or corporate information shall be classified as exempt from public scrutiny. Calls for an “information bill of rights” seem inevitable, including guarantees of privacy for individuals threatened by public and private cyber-surveillance, and obligations of public disclosure for corporate and government institutions.

The legitimacy of democracy and the need for a knowledgeable electorate need to be re-addressed in the context of emerging communications technology. Optimists like Frank Zingione emphasize the capacity of one person with a network to turn a stressed disequilibrium into gigantic, structure-breaking waves (I am not convinced this is optimistic.)

On the negative side, complex media controls manage human consciousness, with very large transnational corporations as the gatekeepers, combined with unrelenting government attempts to control the Net. Cyber-populism may soon allow for authoritative digital plebiscites on questions such as which dispossessed group most deserves to be cut off social assistance, whose lifestyle should be criminalized and which public service privatized, to how low a standard of living we must sink in the interest of corporate profitability in the global marketplace, and which terrorist training camp to target. These possibilities require us to think deeply about civic society, a polity in which the public good takes equal place with concerns for private interest. Without pertinent political results, corporate domination of cyberspace will oblige the most potentially liberating technology since the printing press to succumb to a cultural, economic and political agenda that will not be democratic. Unlike the Viet Nam War, which was eventually going to end, the new world order will not end. As Kroker says, the smell of exterminism is in the air.

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