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The Canadian Fetish

Canadian cultural identity and its nationalism are unable to be “grounded in certainty”\(^1\) because of the multicultural character of the nation. Canada is a pluralistic society – it is culturally divided, and so Canadian national identity refuses to limit itself to one identity. There has always been conflict surrounding the issue of ‘hyphenated and non-hyphenated identity’ in Canada; which challenges collective consensus on the nature of Canadian identities, histories, and heritage.\(^2\) Therefore the individual Canadian must accept the knowledge that many of their fellow Canadians probably embody some aspect of national identity different from their own.

The Canadian identity ‘crisis’ is the result of this potential for a variety of nationalisms and identities. There has been historically much cultural dynamism between the First Nations, French speaking, and English speaking groups of Canada, and *within* them. Northrop Frye describes regional and local identities as forces that are in tension with the ‘political sense of unity’ – that which is more national in character because of its international perspective.\(^3\) Multiculturalism means ‘politically unified identity’ is easily dominated by regional and locally specific cultural identities. Frye argues that true Canadian identity lies somewhere within this tense conflict between the politically unified and regional individuality.\(^4\) But this knowledge does not make it any easier to single out said identity.

“The question of Canadian identity is not a ‘Canadian’ question at all but a regional question;”\(^5\) but despite the fact that Canada is much more suited towards multiculturalism – and its pluralities – the ideal is the opposite, political unity within one uniform identity. It has been difficult to accept the tensions between local identities (i.e. provincially, linguistically,
regionally, ethnically etc.) and that of hegemonic politically unified identity. With politically unified cultural identity as the ideal, cultural homogeneity is seen as a necessary feature of the culture of a nation-state.\textsuperscript{6}

This concept of the nation-state is reflective of the history of European nation building – which was founded upon the idea of the right to national self-determination for one cultural entity; legitimizing the mono-culturally politicized concept of ‘one people, one state.’\textsuperscript{7} However, because of the history and development of the Canadian nation-state, applying this notion to Canada is erroneous. Ethnic solidarity and commonality is understood to provide an “anchor for identity and political security,”\textsuperscript{8} but Canada, because of this notion of ‘one people one state’, is left seemingly vulnerable because of its diversity. This demonstrates that Canadian national identity is as a result characterized by its insistence that it belongs within one state, place, and identity in addition to its refusal to stay fixed within one state, place or identity.

But this character of national identity does not mean that multiculturalism is bad; nor do I wish to characterize diversity as the enemy to unified national identity. Diversity, in the Canadian context, is merely an agent of tension; the counter-hegemonic force which keeps the dominant hegemonic ideologies of ‘Canadianism’ in flux. In fact, there are popular notions of ‘Canadianism’ in the nation; they rely on Canadian icons and products. These are essentially Canadian ‘things’ – whether they be made by Canadians, owned by Canadians, or loved by Canadians, these ‘things’ have been used and accepted as agents of homogenized cultural identity. These things may include: all things hockey related, the \textit{Tim Hortons} franchise, poutine, the \textit{Hudson Bay Company}, lacrosse, Canadian beer, \textit{Canadian Tire} money or Canadian wildlife like geese, caribou or polar bears – basically anything found or originating from within the Canadian borders. For example, the Canadian love for hockey is an assumed rule (despite its
stereotype) by Canadians and non-Canadians alike – and so becomes an essential part of national Canadian identity and an agent of homogenization that is not detrimental to diversity. Culturally iconic Canadian products and ‘things’ are able to homogenize without being enemies to diversity because they are fetishized.

A fetish may be anything held in reverence, high regard, or devotion. Fetishization is the process by which objects (in this case the ‘Canadian things’) are released from their specific function, purpose, and nature and are valued on different terms – in this case as cultural icons and indicators of national (homogenous) identity. The national and cultural symbolism retained in these ‘things’ is not inherent. As Canadian ‘things’ they are relevant and relatable to all Canadians due to their national specificity, and it is because of this national relate-ability that they are fetishized – are revered – as cultural icons which reflect Canadian cultural identity – a ‘Canadianism’. So when people buy into these fetishized ‘things,’ revere, understand, and embrace them as objects symbolizing a unified Canadian identity they view them as reflection of national culture.

In a sense, Canadians have a fetish for ‘Canadian things;’ we recognize that they can ‘compensate for the psychological lack’ of national cultural identification in society because of their Canadian relevance. Fetishized Canadian things establish a sense of national identity that includes the individual’s multiplicity and the diversities of their fellow citizens, and are able to subscribe to politically unified culture regardless of these pluralities. There are advantages to this fetishization: firstly, this fetish for Canadian things protects against exclusionary national identities; second, fetishization saves the fetishist Canadian citizenry from denying multiculturalism or being an enemy to it; and thirdly, the fetishized ‘things’ promote inclusiveness of all groups in Canada, they have secret meaning and relevance to Canadians that
is not recognizable to non-Canadians and therefore are readily accepted by Canadians as national cultural things.\textsuperscript{12}

The artworks, images and advertisements discussed in this paper have found ways to soothe tensions within cultural identity issues and illustrate some of the ways how the Canadian fetish is used to make gestures of cultural nationalism.

Firstly Douglas Coupland’s \textit{Souvenir of Canada} film and its chronicle of the development of ‘Canada House’ (constructed in 2003) presents Coupland’s personal ideas of Canadian identity through material culture and objects. The things inside ‘Canada House’ are all understood to be emblematic of Canadian identity, and Coupland endeavoured to create a world that could only be understood by Canadians.\textsuperscript{13} He filled the house with ‘Canadian things;’ Canadian money, Canadian wildlife, and products of Canadian franchises like \textit{Pizza Pizza} boxes etc. By putting all these Canadian things in one house Coupland creates a ‘Canada House.’ Therefore every Canadian should identify culturally with the items within the house because of their obvious Canadianism. When the ‘Canada House’ exhibit was taken to London England (as seen in \textit{Souvenir of Canada}), Coupland proved that non-Canadians would be unaware of the cultural significance of the items displayed – as most of the visitors to ‘Canada House’ were unsure of ‘what to make of it’. ‘Canada House,’ by showing only Canadian things proved how specifically relevant they are to only Canadians.

Coupland’s Inkjet prints of \textit{Canada Pictures} ‘(2001) depictions of Caribou antlers (\textit{Canada Pictures 4}), stuffed wolves (\textit{Canada Pictures 4}), ookpiks (\textit{Canada Pictures 1}), the C.N. Tower (\textit{Canada Pictures 3}), and \textit{Jos Louis} cakes (\textit{Canada Pictures 2}) are photographs composed of entirely and uniquely Canadian things.\textsuperscript{14} Coupland uses the Canadian fetish to make a gesture of cultural nationalism. His reliance of these ‘things’ to have such grand and symbolic cultural
significance demonstrates not only that he believes and reveres those things for their fetishized powers but also that he expects and assumes that his Canadian audience do as well – and therefore identify with his ‘Canada House’ and *Pictures*. These ‘things’ are endowed with the power to signify ideas of national Canadian identity simply because they have national Canadian context, yet these objects were never created, produced, nor have the function of being symbols of Canadianism. Rather, the water buoys, lobsters, hockey pucks, wolves, and geese in Coupland’s art are the fetishes of the Canadian imagination instead of inherent symbols of Canadian culture and identity.

Brian Jurgen’s exploration of his own First Nation’s identity in his 1998 piece *Prototypes for New Understanding* demonstrates the assimilationist character of the Canadian fetish. Jurgen’s use of hockey equipment to make native masks demonstrates the idea of integration of Canadian culture with Native Canadian culture.

Hockey is famous in Canada. Dubbed Canada’s favourite sport, both Canadians and non-Canadians adhere to the well-established notion (or possibly stereotype) that all Canadians love hockey. Hockey, as a thing loved by Canadians is also a fetish. The sport, its equipment, its athletes have mystical significance relevant to Canadianism even though it’s all just for sport. Jurgen, in his attempt the ideologically integrate his Native identity with that of greater Canadian identity embraces the hockey fetish. He recognizes the power of the hockey fetish and its ability to compensate for aspects of cultural pluralism because of its inclusiveness as the national sport. Jurgen makes his native identity relevant to Canadian national culture by allying it with the fetish.

By embracing this fetishized hockey icon, Jurgen does what Frye describes as the assimilation of local identity to political sense of unity in order to overcome the tensions
between them to reconcile Native culture within national culture. Allying oneself with Canadian things that are also fetishized cultural icons makes it easy to overcome cultural division in Canada because they are already nationally celebrated. By using this fetishized icon Jurgen uses it as a way to gain a sense of belonging as well as a sense of national identity. Despite the fact that placing so much ideological significance in the fetishized hockey icon – which could span from a hockey player to ice – is a superficial way of generating a sense of belonging to national identity in Canada – it is a valid way of accessing it. Jurgen’s work gives proof of the inclusive nature of these Canadian fetishes because no one would ever doubt Jurgen’s objectives in this piece to be anything other than depicting national cultural inclusion.

Hockey’s greatest ally in Canada is the Tim Hortons franchise. Both have culturally iconic status, and both are placed high in the runnings for Canada’s top fetish. They both are understood by many to be integral to the lifestyle and experience of the everyday Canadian. The recent Tim Hortons hockey commercial of 2012 which features hockey super-star Sydney Crosby also demonstrates how Canadian fetishes are used to make national and cultural gestures.

The dialogue of the advert goes as follows:

To us it’s more than just a hockey rink, it’s our theatre; with breath taking drama, and post pounding action. It’s our town hall; as we grow and define ourselves. It’s our shrine to unsung heroes and revered ones. It’s not just brick, border and ice, it’s our home.16

The nationalist sentiment in the dialogue is obvious for the ad suggests that the hockey rink is the ‘home’ of every Canadian. By doing so Tim Hortons uses the already fetishized icon of hockey it order to transfer its fetishist powers onto itself and thereby become a Canadian cultural icon and integral to Canadian national identity too.

It is a great marketing tactic; through the fetishization Tim Hortons is able to be easily identified with all Canadians because of its wide availability and adopted purpose as an access
route into Canadian national communalism. If you want to ‘feel Canadian’ go to Tim Hortons. Since it is a fetish that also fetishizes itself, Tim Hortons, like hockey, has become a cultural icon which has vested interests in propagating notions of cultural nationalism for the sake of maintaining their mystical fetishized status (and booming business). At the end of the 2012 commercial the narrator encourages Canadians to buy into Tim Hortons in order to help “celebrate hockey and all that which brings Canadians together.”[17] The custom to forsake plurality for the uniform ideal may be dangerous, as a staff writer of the Winnipeg Free Press reveals that “Tim Hortons as an important Canadian cultural touchstone . . . [may be] a reflection of what we risk becoming (e.g. a conformist, corporatist and less independent nation).”[18] With Tim Hortons as a national symbol its fetishist powers can establish a sense of belonging within the diverse groups of Canada, and the risk to become conformist becomes all the more likely since the fetish takes root in national identity.

What links the artworks and advertisements discussed in this paper together is the fact that they use fetishized objects and products to validate themselves and connect themselves to the national Canadian community. This may demonstrate that there is an adherence to the arbitrary description of the state and state identity which insists upon elements of cultural, linguistic, and ethnic uniformity in Canada. While it is apparent that these elements of uniformity are impossible to achieve in Canada without compromising its uniqueness, it seems as though Canadians may be willing to accept these gentle forms of homogenization through the use of those Canadian ‘things’ that have been fetishized into national cultural icons. If nothing else, the successes of the advertisements and artwork discussed above support this.

There may be many reasons for why these fetishization processes have taken place, but I believe this adherence to the Canadian fetish is reflected by Slavoj Zizek’s concept of
fetishization by the colloquial term, “making the best of it.”\(^{19}\) We cannot change the fact that Canada is diverse, and its diversity makes it difficult to pinpoint any aspect of uniform national culture or identity. Since we cannot change this aspect of the Canadian community, we make do, and make efforts to culturally unify multicultural Canada without compromising it. Canadian culture and identity refuses to stay fixed in one state, place or identity – and so in order to avoid the anxieties which arise from this realization, Canadian ‘things’ are fetishized into national cultural icons to make it seem as though Canadian culture and identity is fixed in place.

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10 Lisa Freinkel, “The use of Fetish” *Shakespeare Studies* 33, (2005), 115


12 This listing of the three advantages of fetishist perversions is an adaptation of Kocela’s list of Freud’s definition of its advantages: a) that the fetishist protects against castration b) perversions saves the fetishist from being homosexual and c) that the sexual meaning of the fetish is not recognized by others and can be procured more readily than other sexual objects (by the
fetishist). Freudian definition of fetishism surrounds discourses on sexuality and phallic substitution, but as Kocela says, “the interpretive strategy is most important” and so this conceptual framework has been adapted for the purposes of this paper. Christopher Kocela, *Fetishism and its discontents in post-1960 American fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 9.


17 Tim Hortons, “Tim Hortons 2012’.
