WHAT IS GOOD FOR ANTHROPOLOGY IN CANADA?

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the nature of Canadian Anthropology in terms of a fundamental bicentricity. It is argued that the binarism of Canadian Anthropology reflects the constitution of Canadian society and marks it off from its American counterpart where difference in general, and binarism in particular, are submerged in a "unity of we". The argument is constructed in the context of a consideration of which texts might be rightfully installed in a Canadian anthropological canon.

RÉSUME

L'auteur examine la nature de l'Anthropologie Canadienne contemporaine en tant que constituée par un binairisme fondamental. Ce binairisme réflète la constitution de la sociétè Canadienne et distingue celle-coi de l'Anthropologie Américaine, qui a tendence à submerger ses differences. L'auteur tente de dèterminer quels textes seraient requis dans l'Anthropologie Canadienne àfin d'unifier la discipline.

INTRODUCTION

To speak of 'British Anthropology' as opposed to 'French Anthropology' or 'American Anthropology' makes immediate sense. Each of these phrases refers to a recognizable tradition of inquiry, with its own set of authoritative authors and texts: Malinowski/ Radcliffe-Brown/Evans-Pritchard/Mauss/Levi-Strauss/Dumont/Boas/ Benedict/Geertz.

But 'Canadian Anthropology' -- what is that? It is only very recently that we have begun to discover its history (see McFeat 1976; McKillop 1987; Barker 1987), or taken a serious look at its

social organization (Preston 1983). And the conclusion that seems to stem from these studies is that as far as a tradition is concerned, there isn't one (or very much of one anyway). Who would a roll-call of Canadian anthropologists begin with? Were one to draw up a canon, what texts would it include? The Conflict of European and Eastern Algonquin Cultures 1504-1770 (Bailey 1937)? Social and Economic Change among the Northern Ojibway (Dunning 1959)? The Planiverse: Computer Contact with a Two-Dimension World (Dewdney 1984)? Natives and Newcomers (Trigger 1985)?

The task of constructing a canon is as, if not more, difficult than finding an answer to the question 'As Canadian as _____?' Every Canadian knows the answer to 'As American as _____?' but they are necessarily more reticent as regards the previous question. Why? Because the answer would depend on whether one were English-Canadian or French-Canadian, and the matter is further complicated by the fact that one could well be neither. Hence, the best answer to date remains that of a woman responding to a Morningside survey: "As Canadian as possible under the circumstances". This answer underlines the contingency of the Canadian identity (Howes 1990), and also goes a considerable way toward explaining why there can be no such thing as a Canadian Anthropology. To speak in such a singular way would be to exclude everything that has been accomplished in Quebec (Gold and Tremblay 1983). To put this another way, while something can be '100% American' there is no such thing as '100% Canadian', except perhaps for the new airline which substituted ">" for the a/e in Canadi>n.

Nevertheless, to return to the subject of a canon, surely there are certain titles which can be struck -- namely. The Planiverse.

I

On the contrary, The Planiverse, a 'science-fantasy' exploration of the nature of social life in a two-dimensional universe, is a quintessentially 'Canadi>n' ethnography. It was written by A.K. Dewdney, who teaches computer science at the University of Western Ontario. It would be easy, too easy, to see the idea for this book as something borrowed from Edwin Abbott's 1884 classic Flatland, and Yendred of Arde (the 2-D creature with whom contact is made) as a being modelled after Stephen Spielberg's E.T. But the problem with all such diffusionist (or what are now called 'inter-textual') explanations is that they do not explain why the author

was receptive to these sources, and not others, in the first place. A properly anthropological explanation would delve behind the texts and attempt to specify what was unique about Dewdney's life experience such that Flatland and E.T. appealed to him.

Significantly, The Planiverse is dedicated to "my father Selwyn Hanington Dewdney, artist, writer, scholar" (A.K. Dewdney 1984:5). Selwyn Dewdney was a more complex character than even this glowing dedication would imply, for as Christopher Dewdney, the brother of A.K. recalls:

> ... when I was six or seven or eight years old, [father] dragged me [and A.K.] around every summer on ... canoe expeditions and he'd introduce me to shamans and we'd be documenting Indian rock paintings. So I was steeped in Amerindian lore. My father, I realize now, had actually converted from Anglicanism to Amerindianism. I think he believed something intrinsic about the Amerindian identity was one with his own set of beliefs. ... And this became my matrix (O'Brien 1985:91).

Peter O'Brien (1985:90) has pointed to how the style of Christopher's poetry may be attributable to his exposure to the mysteries of the rock art of the Canadian Shield; so, I would argue, did the young A.K. become obsessed with the idea of documenting life in a two-dimensional universe as a result of these summer-long canoe-trips with his amateur archaeologist father.[1]   In point of fact, the drawings of Yendred and the other creatures of Arde are as reminiscent of the pictographs in the 'X-ray style' to be found throughout the Shield as they are of Spielberg's E.T., and the problematic of the book (2-D existence) is also directly related to the rock art, since the original producers of that art restricted themselves to thinking and drawing in two dimensions as well.[2]

There is a deeper sense in which The Planiverse is a quintessentially 'Canadi>n' ethnography: it conforms to the archetypical pattern laid down by Margaret Atwood in Surfacing (perhaps the most formulaic Canadian novel there is). That pattern may be described as follows: child follows in footsteps of father to discover meaning and salvation inherent in an alien universe.

Thus, Surfacing is a novel about a woman who returns to her childhood home -- a cabin on an island in northeastern Quebec -- in order to solve the mystery of her father's disappearance. In the cabin, she discovers a map with crosses on it, and a stack of papers with numbers scrawled alongside drawings of "hands and

antlered figures, a half-man with four sticks coming out of it", etc. (Atwood 1973:101). At first, the narrator interprets these drawings as signs that her father had gone insane. Subsequently, she comes across a few pages from a book Rock Paintings of the Central Shield, by Dr. Robin M. Grove, and realizes that her father was, in fact, engaged in charting and recording the "signs" left by "the original ones", the Indians. "The Indians did not own salvation but they had once known where it lived and their signs marked the sacred places, the places where you could learn the truth" (Atwood 1973:145).

The narrator goes to one of the places marked on the map, but cannot find any evidence of rock painting. Suspecting that this might be due to a change in the level of the lake, she dives underwater and there experiences a vision of "a dark oval trailing limbs" (Atwood 1973:142). Such a motif is typical of the pictographs of the Shield (see Dewdney and Kidd, 1967), but it also has a personal significance for the narrator: it is the soul of the foetus she had been compelled to abort by her ex-husband. This vision leads her to confront her own and her civilization's "capacity for death", which is seen as resulting from that civilization's drive for technological mastery over nature (Atwood 1973:147). The vision also awakens in her a longing "to be whole" (Atwood 1973:146). The narrator finally achieves this "wholeness" or "salvation" by rejecting everything that "divides us into fragments" -- language, society, technology -- and becoming one with nature.

Surfacing may be said to revolve around the theme of having to erase what George Grant has called "the mark within us" left by our "conquering relation to place". As he observes:

> When we go into the Rockies [or the recesses of the Shield] we may have the sense that gods are there. But if so, they cannot manifest themselves to us as ours. They are the gods of another race, and we cannot know them because of what we are and what we did. There can be nothing immemorial for us except the environment as object (Grant 1969:17).

Selwyn Dewdney (1970) expressed similar sentiments in his "Ecological notes on the Ojibway shaman-artist", even though, as we have seen from his son Christopher's testimony, he came closer than almost any other Canadian to overcoming the "conquering relation to place" and communing with these "gods of another race".

In any event, that Selwyn Dewdney was the real life exemplar of Atwood's father-figure is beyond question. I mean this not in the sense that Dewdney was the model for Atwood's character (she knew nothing of him), but that his life was as prototypical as that of the character she constructed. However, the fact that Atwood's female narrator achieved grace (or illumination) by abandoning technology, whereas A.K. (insofar as he appears in his book) attained wisdom by experimenting with it, poses some difficulties for our allegedly "archetypical pattern". I would submit that this has to do with the relationship of Canadian women to technologies of communication being different from that of Canadian men. The latter have been deeply involved in inventing it (Bell invented the telephone in Nova Scotia; Marconi invented the television in Montreal), attaining perfection in and through it (Glenn Gould's recording of the Goldberg Variations), and theorizing about it (the greatest theorists of communications this century has known remain Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan). In short, technology is very much on the Canadian (male) mind (Korker 1984).[3]

If I have succeeded in persuading the reader that The Planiverse may be regarded as a classic of 'Canadi>n' ethnography, so much the better, but my main concern is rather with what we can learn from having considered it as though it were typical of a certain national genre. What we have learned is that, irrespective of the otherness of the Ardreans, what inspired and in a sense enabled A.K. to construct them as he did was his experience as a youth. That is, a certain distinctly Canadian structure for the acquisition and articulation of experience was instilled in him by his father, and The Planiverse is a projection, or better, the realization, of that structure.[4] What Ardreans are like in and of themselves is, obviously, not something we are ever going to know.

II

In recent years, anthropologists have become increasingly conscious of how their position in their own society may influence what they come to know and write about other societies. While few have gone so far as to explore the relevance of their childhood experience to what they write as adults, as we have just done for A.K. Dewdney, many now feel it necessary to identify their sex, ethnic background and social class.

In this section of the paper, I would like to underline the significance of yet another dimension to the formation of an

anthropologist's psyche -- namely, the constitution of the society from which he or she comes. This approach is partly suggested by the word "constitution".   According to the <u>Concise Oxford Dictionary</u>, this word refers to "mode in which State is organized" as well as "mental character" and "character of the body as regards health, strength, etc.". Following Durkheim and Mauss (1963), I take this to mean that the life of the mind is structured after the life of individuals in society or, in other words, that the form in which one thinks is mediated by the form of one's community. I would further argue that the <u>excellence</u> of any given writing or cultural production (including ethnography) consists in the degree to which it gives expression to the <u>archaei,</u> or first conceptions and principles, of the theory implicit in the structure of the writer's own society.

This constitutional approach to the organization of knowledge is inspired not only by Durkheim and Mauss, but also by Alasdair MacIntyre's (1988) trenchant critique of the Enlightenment ideal of a tradition-independent rationality.   No such rationality exists, according to MacIntyre.   Also according to MacIntyre, every tradition is predicated on some conception of 'the good' for human beings, even those traditions which do not recognize themselves as such (e.g. liberalism, or as I shall argue here, Canadian Anthropology), and it is the articulation of that good that constitutes the <u>telos</u> of intellectual inquiry within the tradition in question.

By way of illustration of the above approach, let me set out some of the most salient contrasts between the American and Canadian constitutions, and then draw out the implications these contrasts have for the achievement of excellence in endeavours ranging from painting to anthropology.

Whereas the <u>ultimus finis</u> of human life under the U.S. Constitution is to be free from government interference, to enjoy the equal protection of the laws, and to participate in a "unity of we", under the Canadian Constitution it is to be subject to a regime of "peace, order and good government", and to participate in a "unity of you and I" (Howes 1990).   In the case of the United States, the ideal of a "unity of we" may be inferred from the first lines of the Preamble to the Constitution -- "<u>We</u> the People of the United States, in order to form a more <u>perfect Union,</u> establish Justice", etc. -- but the idea was already implicit in the Declaration of Independence, as James White (1984: 238-9) explains:

> The "one people" the Declaration seeks to create is not a
> diverse people, different in talents and interests, in mode

of life, in character and manners -- not a nation as [Edmund] Burke has taught us to conceive it. It is a single whole, a single person, as it were, with a single set of sentiments and determinations ... "We" are blended into a single "one", the stated ideal of equality among people becomes an ideal of a very different sort, of merger into a common identity.

As Edwin Black (1975:173) points out:

the Canadian federation was inspired by a purpose altogether different from that which animated the American union. This purpose ... was to safeguard the permanence and to promote the expansion of two national cultures. It is here, in the essential partnership of two linguistic and cultural groups that one finds the dominant fact of Canadian nationhood. Here too, says the historian Arthur Lower, "is the most resounding note in our history, the juxtaposition of two civilizations, two philosophies, two contradictory views of the fundamental nature of man". To Professor Malcolm Ross, "we are inescapably, and almost from the first, the bifocal people". The characteristic prudence of the Canadian ... "derives from the necessity for taking second thought, for having one foot on each bank of the Ottawa".

The bifocality, or better bicentricity, of the Canadian constitution explains why there is no Canadian equivalent to either 'American individualism' or 'American nationalism': 'Canadian individualism' simply makes no sense, and while there is recurring talk of something called "Canadian nationalism", it has never succeeded in overcoming either 'Quebecois nationalism' or the various regionalisms (Western, Maritime, etc.). Compare the following comment on the U.S. Constitution: "Walt Whitman wrote, "I contain multitudes". That is what the Constitution does, an astonishing feat considering the variety of multitudes that have landed on American shores, and continue to land" (Morrow quoted in Howes 1990). What is remarkable about this quotation is the manner in which "the variety of multitudes" is reduced to (or engulfed by) a single person, an I. A related example would be the American song in aid of famine relief for Ethiopia, We Are The World.[5] What both of these examples evidence is a mind that tends to operate synthetically (or better, concentrically): an 'I' or 'we' which

expands to encompass the whole world. What is missing from the constitution of that mind, evidently, is any sense of proportion, of limit.

The Canadian consciousness, by contrast, is pervaded by a sense of proportionality, but has difficulty arriving at the notion of a whole which is not divided internally. Of course, the latter difficulty is also the condition for the achievement of excellence in the Canadian setting, as appears from a consideration of the productions of some of this country's most distinguished artists and thinkers. For example, who is the greatest Canadian painter? Alex Colville. What most stands out about his paintings is their measured quality and juxtaposition of opposites, as in Horse and Train, the most suspenseful of paintings, or Couple on Beach, where the couple's attention is turned in different directions. One cannot think a Colville painting as a "unity of we" or "single whole".[6]

Who is the greatest Canadian recording artist? Glenn Gould. What he plays best is Bach. Bach's music is preeminently contrapuntal. The essence of counterpoint is, of course, simultaneity of voices: "a melody is always in the process of being repeated by one or another voice ... the voices always continuing to sound against, as well as with, all the others" (Said 1983:45). It is significant, in view of what was said earlier about technology and the Canadian mind, that in 1964 "Gould left the concert world and was reborn as a creature of the technology he exploited to permit more or less infinite reproduction, infinite repetition ("take-twoness" he called it)" (Said 1983:52).[7]

To turn from the arts to philosophy and the social sciences, were one to ask, "Who is the greatest Canadian thinker?", the answer would be Marshall McLuhan.[8] McLuhan's "dichotomania" has been well described by Marchand (1989:245-8). Or again, who is the greatest Canadian political theorist? C.B. Macpherson. A constant theme in Macpherson's work is the notion that there are two competing models of the human essence. The first model is based on the assumption that human beings are first and foremost consumers; the second that human beings have a desire to better themselves intellectually as well as the ability to transcend materialism. It is in terms of these two models that Macpherson describes the different historical/philosophical periods of liberalism.

The best that Canadians can do is thus to represent (or play) things bicentrically. Is there any evidence of bicentrism in Canadian anthropology? Numerous instances could be cited, but I shall mention only three. There is Roger McDonnel's (1984) essay which argues that "from first contact Kaska have irregularly manifested

two quite different organizational patterns" -- one insular, one diffuse. There is David Turner's (1985) Life Before Genesis, which contrasts the "movement toward two" type of social organization of the Australian Aborigines with the "movement toward one" type characteristic of the Cree of Northern Manitoba, and suggests that these two "primals" can be discerned behind the whole subsequent course of human history. Finally, there is Michael Lambek's account of trance in Mayotte, with its insistence that:

> [s]pirit and host are two entirely different persons. ... This opposition between two discrete identities, host and spirit, is the single most crucial element, the axiom, upon which the entire system of possession rests (Lambek 1982:40-41).

As intimated above, the best that Americans can do is represent things concentrically or, what is to say the same thing, individually. Evidence of this propensity can be found in the central tenet of the work of the Culture and Personality School, which is that cultures can be seen as individual personalities writ large.[9] In recent years, this conception of cultures as bounded individuals has come undone, albeit only to be replaced by a totalizing conception of a higher order -- Wallerstein's "world-system theory" (Marcus and Fischer 1986:80-81). As Marcus and Fischer (1986:38) point out in their state-of-the-(American)-art of ethnographic monograph, it is now essential that an ethnography

> ... register the constitutive workings of impersonal international political and economic systems on the local level where fieldwork usually takes place. These workings can no longer be accounted for as merely external impacts upon local, self-contained cultures. Rather, external systems have their thoroughly local definition and penetration, and are formative of the symbols and shared meanings within the most intimate life-worlds of ethnographic subjects.

At the same time American ethnographers have grown less inclined to recognize any distinction between 'We the people' and 'the World', given the assumption that a single 'world-system' embraces us all, they have grown more inclined to focus on individual lives (i.e. writing biographies rather than ethnographies) and active human subjects (i.e. the individual as an actor rather than a robot in a

structure).   This individualistic thrust, which may seem to run
counter to the holistic thrust of world-system theory, is in fact
nothing more than the other face of the American commitment to
individuality, or the 'single whole', noted previously.

A few die-hard structuralists, such as Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney
(1982:16) have resisted the notion of the "individual as an actor",
but their critique is scarcely heeded because of the contemporary
"incredulity towards metanarratives" such as structuralism (Marcus
and Fischer 1986:8).   Indeed, American ethnography is said to have
entered

> a   period   of   experimentation   ...   characterized   by
> eclecticism,   the   play   of   ideas   free   of   authoritative
> paradigms, critical and reflexive views of subject matter,
> openness to diverse influences embracing whatever seems
> to work in practice, and tolerance of uncertainty about a
> field's direction and of incompleteness in some of its
> projects (Marcus and Fischer 1986:x).

In point of fact, there is a paradigm which undergirds this
"experimental moment" -- namely, pragmatism, with its doctrines of
"eclectism", "transience", "meliorism" and "the truth is what works"
(McDermott 1986).   Were the proponents of experimentation a bit
more reflexive about their approach, they would recognize that
their abandonment of theory (i.e. 'metanarratives') has had the
effect of foregrounding the unexamined premises of a distinctly
homespun philosophy, which has no more to commend it than, say,
British empiricism or French rationalism, as far as a global
methodology is concerned.

                                III

The preceding analysis of the constitution of knowledge in the
United States and Canada, and of how what is good for the one
differs from what is good for the other in accordance with the
archaei, or first conceptions and principles, of the constitutions of
the two societies, is no more than a sketch, and a sketchy one at
that.   For all its weaknesses, however, I think it does illustrate how
"the ways in which Americans [as opposed to Canadians] live and
organize themselves and their intellectual endeavours" have "played
their parts" in what is distinctive in American as opposed to
Canadian ethnography to an even more significant extent than Ken

Burridge (1983:318), to whom these words belong, would allow. I also think that a constitutional approach to the analysis of texts has more to commend it than the increasingly literary approaches to ethnography within anthropology itself. At least what has been advanced in the foregoing pages is a theory that an be tested as opposed to a 'text-building strategy' the whole purpose of which is to persuade.

In closing, let me comment further on the expanding field of the literary in anthropology, or what could be called "the flight from theory to style", since this transformation, which came over American ethnography in the early 1980s, now threatens to engulf all of the world's anthropologies, given that American ethnography is where it is at (Marcus and Fischer 1986:viii).

The process started innocently enough with Clifford Geertz' (1973) suggestion that: "The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, ... which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong". As anthropologists who followed Geertz became more and more accustomed to 'reading' other cultures, they also, not surprisingly, became more conscious of how what they 'really' do is write. The focus of discussion therefore shifted from the problem of 'facing the other' to the problem of 'facing the page' -- that is, from fieldwork methodology and anthropological theory to text-building strategies. Already by 1982, Marcus and Cushman (1982:26) could write,

> In this emergent situation, ethnographers read widely among new works for models, being interested as much, if not more, in styles of text construction as in their cultural analysis, both of which are difficult to separate in any case.

This deflection of attention from the problem of how to conceptualize the other to the "process of textualization" itself is nowhere more apparent than in the cover illustration to Writing Culture (Clifford and Marcus 1985), which depicts Stephen Tyler hunched over a notebook completely self-absorbed, his informants gazing over his shoulders, apparently quite bored. This end-state (a curious inversion of Geertz's original metaphor), in which the other fades into the background, and all of an ethnographer's powers and skill are directed toward an imagined audience, is what lies in store for all of us, unless we are able to become less self-conscious about writing, and more aware of our constitutions.

NOTES

1. Though not the work of a professional, it must be said that Selwyn Dewdney's <u>Sacred Scrolls of the Southern Ojibway</u> (1975) is first-rate ethnology, and <u>Rock Paintings of the Great Lakes</u> (Dewdney and Kidd 1967) an important contribution to Shield archaeology.

2. It is interesting to compare Maurice Leenhardt's (1979) account of Canaque 'mythic thought', which was also two-dimensional.

3. But women's minds too, since (somehow) Atwood's narrator did come back to write about and publish her experience.

4. I would like to trace the implications this has for a reading of Ursula K. (as in Kroeber) LeGuin's science fiction, but space does not permit.

5. Other examples, drawn from Anthropology, include Lee Drummond's (1986) treatment of James Bond as an American culture hero, and Marcus' and Fischer's (1986:viii) explanation for their focus on the American situation in their book in terms of "reflect[ing] a historical development in which anthropology in the United States seems to be synthesizing the three national traditions [British, American and French]".

6. Colville's American counterpart is Norman Rockwell (Howes, n.d.). See the latter's "The Golden Rule" or "Apollo II Space Team" for examples of a 'unity of we'.

7. While Gould might sound 'post-modern' on this account, what he was, in fact, doing was fulfilling the purpose of the Canadian constitution.

8. "The most important thinker since Newton, Darwin, Freud, Einstein and Pavlov", according to the <u>New York Herald Tribune</u>.

9. Richard Handler's (1988) analysis of Quebecois nationalism is predicated on an analogous theoretical construction, the 'collective individual'. One wonders to what extent this construct, though it certainly picks out something, is justified by the material.

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