

## Signposts of Cultural Identity:

### George Grant's *Lament for a Nation* and Mel Hurtig's *The Vanishing Country*

Jennifer MacLennan  
University of Saskatchewan

As every student of Canadian culture knows, the rhetoric of Canadian identity is marked by persistent patterns of cultural resistance, combined with anxiety over the country's potential disintegration from any of a multitude of causes, ranging from the economic to the political. These motifs permeate scholarly and popular discourses, at once reflecting and helping to shape the culture that produced them. The recurrence of these intertwined themes across so many of our cultural expressions points to something greater than a mere pragmatic necessity. Although Canada's circumstances certainly make its citizens more vulnerable than most nations to American influence, the fact that "Canadians are forever taking the national pulse like doctors at a sick bed" (Atwood 33) is more than simply a product of the "geographical fate" that made them neighbours to the United States (Dorland ix). The pervasiveness of themes of loss and resistance suggests that these themes also perform a ritual function in the process of identity formation, enacting and preserving the rhetorical vision that unites Canada and shapes its cultural ethos.

The nature of that vision, and its function as an expression of identity, is the subject of this paper, which offers a comparative analysis of two signal discourses in the tradition of Canadian identity rhetoric, one contemporary and one a classic: Mel Hurtig's *The Vanishing Country* (2002) and George Grant's *Lament for a Nation* (1965). While each can be understood to have arisen out of specific historical and political circumstances, what is more interesting from the perspective of this analysis is their participation in a discursive tradition that transcends their particular context and that binds them, in sensibility, pattern, and content, to other

expressions of Canadian identity. It is this tradition that is the primary focus of this paper.

Although both Grant and Hurtig offer a “passionate defence of our Canadian identity” (Emberly 15), their books differ in tone and outlook. Grant’s book is the more resigned and pensive, Hurtig’s the more positive and heartening. The difference between the two works is primarily in the level of hope each expresses—no small matter, as Grant himself acknowledges: “By writing of the defeat of Canadian nationalism, one encourages in a small way the fulfilment of the prophecy. Most men, when in a weak position, need immanent hopes to keep alive their will to fight against odds” (13). What Hurtig provides is exactly that immanent hope, allowing the possibility that there may be a way out, that, in his words, “we don’t have to . . . let our corporate elite, our selfish plutocracy, our radical right, and our inept politicians continue to sell our country” (303).

The optimism of Hurtig’s book may be somewhat surprising, considering that, during the more than thirty years that separate the two books, the process of continental integration that led Grant to conclude in 1970 that Canada had already “ceased to be a nation” (97) actually escalated. Despite Canada’s being further along that road, Hurtig is not ready to give up; he is less resigned than Grant and full of insistence that “we *can* be the best country anywhere, or at least one of the very best” (349). He seems, in fact, to be reacting directly to Grant’s conclusion: “Far too many Canadians, including far too many Canadian nationalists, say it’s already too late. I say to heck with that. Even if the chances are slim, . . . nothing else should be more important” (419). Nevertheless, Hurtig isn’t unreservedly optimistic about the situation facing us; indeed, he recognizes the possibility that “unless some very important changes are made soon, Canada is going to become no better than a totally dominated, weak colony of the United States” (301). The resistance he encourages may “fail. But an even greater failure will be if we don’t even try.

What a terrible tragedy that would be” (433).

Both Grant and Hurtig acknowledge that their books are propelled by anger—anger at the failures of governance that have left Canada vulnerable to “widespread homogenizing, continentalist forces” (Emberly 15) that are eroding traditional Canadian values. In Grant’s words, Canadian willingness to “use the government to protect the common good ... [and] restrain the individual’s freedom in the interests of the community” (77) are the values that have “shaped our institutions and ... penetrated into the lives of generations of Canadians” (49-50). These values allowed Canadians to create and preserve “at every level of ... life—religious, educational, political, social—certain forms of existence that distinguish [Canada] from the United States” (84). Despite its tone of guarded optimism, Hurtig describes his work as “a harsh and angry book” (431); but he insists that such anger is an appropriate response to the fact that “our country is being sold out and our national soul is being squashed.” If now “is not a time for harsh words and anger,” he demands, “when will it be?” (431).

Grant’s book, like Hurtig’s, was written “too much from anger” (12), but in tone it seems not so much angry as meditative, even melancholy, as befits a lamentation for “what has been lost” (106). Though also written in the first person, it is less colloquial and more formal than Hurtig’s exhortation. A lamentation, Grant explains, is an appropriate response to “the death or the dying of something loved. This lament mourns the end of Canada as a sovereign state.... Lamentation is not an indulgence in despair or cynicism.... there is not only pain and regret, but also celebration of passed good” (24). As a lament, the book functions as a kind of “celebration of memory; in this case, the memory of that tenuous hope that was the principle of my ancestors” (26). The hope he speaks of—an impossible one, as it turns out—was “that on the northern half of this continent we could build a community which had a stronger sense of the common good

and of public order than was possible under the individualism of the American capitalist dream” (12). It is how this hope has played out that forms the centrepiece of both works.

Both writers take as ground for their arguments the impending—and perhaps inevitable—disappearance of the Canadian nation and of Canadian values, and each ponders the shape of what will remain after the erosion of Canadian sovereignty is complete. Neither envisions full political integration with the US, however; both recognize somewhat grimly that the American empire’s interests would be better served in keeping Canada as a kind of “vassal state ... a nation essentially in name only—an economic, social, political, and cultural colony, a place not a country, a feeble remnant of a once proud nation” (Hurtig 431). Though they argue similarly on this point, their very similarity illustrates the differences in tone that are typical of the two books. Hurtig’s tough and exhortative style features more direct, concrete diction than Grant’s and relies on rhetorical questions to heighten his audience’s emotional reaction and promote their active engagement with his cause: “Why would the American Republican Party want over 20 million adult Canadians, most of whom would likely vote Democrat? Better, they will say, Canada should be a northern Puerto Rico, a servile, non-represented, non-voting colony. And anyway, they will say, we’re already well on our way to owning the whole country” (431). Grant makes the same point, but in a declarative form that leaves no room for doubt, and with muted, more abstract language: “the dominant forces in the Republic do not need to incorporate us. A branch-plant satellite, which has shown in the past that it will not insist on any difficulties in foreign or defence policy, is a pleasant arrangement for one’s northern frontier” (97).

This preoccupation with the country’s potential dissolution and the tenuousness of its survival is, of course, as Margaret Atwood famously established in 1972, “a national habit of

mind” (13), and places both books firmly within a recognizable Canadian tradition.<sup>1</sup> What threatens Canadian survival is the country’s willing embrace of the relentless corporate liberalism of the American empire and its self-interested corporations, which Grant argues “has destroyed indigenous cultures in every corner of the globe. Communist imperialism is more brutally immediate, but American capitalism has shown itself more subtly able to dissolve indigenous societies” (76).

According to Atwood, the pervasive Canadian motif of survival has a number of distinctive features: “Victims abound; the philosophy is survivalism, the typical narrative a sequence of dire events which the hero escapes (if he does escape) not with triumph or honour or riches but merely with his life” (“Canadian-American Relations” 386). Grant’s and Hurtig’s books can be seen as studies of the same pattern of victimage, and their narratives present sequences of events that are, at least to Canadian traditionalists, dire: Hurtig describes, in rich and specific detail, “the tragic sell-out of Canada [by a] ... selfish, grasping, and greedy plutocracy” (xiii), while Grant situates his story of honour and loss in the “tragedy of [former Prime Minister John] Diefenbaker ... [whose] inability to govern is linked with the inability of this country to be sovereign” (25).

But these works have more in common with each other, and with others in the tradition of Canadian identity rhetoric, than simply a preoccupation with the question of survival. I have

---

<sup>1</sup> It seems that it is part of being Canadian to see virtually every social, political, or economic event as a crisis presaging the demise of the country; for instance, Canada’s continued existence has been seen to be threatened not only by NAFTA and the FTA, but by the failure of the Meech Lake Accord, by the Oka crisis, by the Constitutional talks, by the Charlottetown Accord, by Quebec’s threats of a referendum on separation, by the referendum itself, by the debate over Senate reform, and even by the cuts at the CBC. While all of these issues are serious enough, only in Canada is talk of the country’s demise part of nearly every discussion, whether political, cultural, or economic. See, for example, Marci McDonald, *Yankee Doodle Dandy*; Charles Gordon, “Canada’s Imminent Breakup”; Joe Clark, *A Nation Too Good to Lose*; David Orchard, *The Fight for Canada*; Maude Barlow and Bruce Campbell, *Take Back the Nation*; Don Braid and Sydney Sharpe, *Breakup: Why the West Feels Left Out of Canada*; Maude Barlowe, *Parcel of Rogues*; Marjorie Montgomery Bowker, *On Guard for Thee*; and Duncan Cameron, ed., *The Free Trade Papers*.

discovered in my study of the tradition a number of other recurrent elements, including the persistently ironic depiction of identity in a culture torn between the expression of its own distinctiveness and its desire for the economic prosperity afforded by close ties with the American empire. In explaining *Why We Act Like Canadians*, Pierre Berton somewhat playfully characterizes this complex dynamic as “a bit of a love-hate relationship” (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 5), but Margaret Atwood is somewhat more cynical: “Part of the much-sought Canadian identity is that few nationals have done a more enthusiastic job of selling their country than have Canadians. Of course there are buyers willing to exploit, as they say, our resources; there always are. It is our eagerness to sell that needs attention” (“Travels Back” 113). Grant frames the same issue as an inescapable problem: “Those who want to maintain separateness also want the advantages of the age of progress.” Unfortunately, he explains, the two desires are not reconcilable, since “nationalism can only be asserted successfully by an identification with technological advance; but technological advance entails the disappearance of those indigenous differences that give substance to nationalism” (88). In other words, the luxury of nationalism is feasible only for a dominant nation that sets the agenda of culture and commerce.

Nationalism, then, is an economic impediment, since by its very nature it resists the homogenization that is necessary to establish and sustain corporate capitalism. Branch-plant economies must inevitably give rise to branch-plant mentalities. Thus, the pressing question, articulated by Lawrence Martin and quoted by Hurtig, remains, “How long can a country continue to integrate with a neighbour ten times its population without eventually losing itself in the process?” (xiii). Grant’s answer is definitive—it cannot: “Once it was decided that Canada was to be a branch-plant society of American capitalism, the issue of Canadian nationalism had been settled” (56). For Hurtig, the process is not settled, and can still perhaps be halted, although

“for that to happen, important changes have to be made very soon” (xiv).

Both books explore the ambivalence of Canada’s relationship with the US, which so permeates Canadian experience, but they differ in perspective. As George Grant explains the problem, “We want through formal nationalism to escape the disadvantages of the American dream; yet we also want the benefits of junior membership in the empire” (11). Hurtig, optimistic in spite of the “disastrous accumulation of factors that together are likely to prove fatal” (402), nevertheless offers the possibility that Canada can retain its independence and still enjoy a high standard of living, that it can be at once “a prosperous, independent country” and remain “in charge of its own future, instead of a dependent and weak American colony” (399). By contrast, Grant believes these two goals to be mutually exclusive, and is resigned to “the impossibility of [traditional Canadian-style] conservatism as a viable political ideology” in an era dominated by the homogenizing forces of corporate liberalism and technological change (78).

In addition to its emphasis on Canada’s ambivalent relationship to the American empire, and the irony of identification that this relationship produces, the rhetoric of Canadian identity frequently features as a protagonist a heroic “everyman” figure, who is offered as a representative, even quintessential (though not necessarily typical) Canadian. This individual’s experience is conflated with the broader Canadian cultural reality; thus, what happens to the protagonist is a depiction in personalized terms of what is taking place in the culture at large. In many instances—though as Grant’s narrative demonstrates, not universally—this protagonist is the rhetor him- or herself, a feature that gives the discussion of Canadian cultural identity an even more intensely personal flavour, as I have observed elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> See my articles, listed in the Works Cited.

Hurtig's book follows the pattern explicitly, at least at the outset, positioning itself as a kind of memoir:

Even when I was young, it always seemed to me that we were fortunate to live in Canada. My parents were in their teens and quite poor when they came to this country from Eastern Europe, but through hard work and determination they, and most of their friends, managed to work their way up out of poverty....

I was a child born in the Great Depression. I watched my two brothers go off to war, one of them serving overseas with the Canadian army for almost five years. I followed the war closely and when it was over, when my oldest brother finally came back to Canada and we heard his stories of heroism, terror, and sacrifice, I too began to count my blessings that I lived in such a fortunate country. I was, even beginning in my early teens, a proud Canadian. (3)

Although Grant, unlike Hurtig and others, never positions *himself* as the quintessential Canadian, he nevertheless uses a similar technique of personalization, embodying the crisis of Canadian nationalism in the figure of Diefenbaker. The book is not simply a partisan discourse, however; Diefenbaker is shown as flawed in judgement and in leadership, but despite his mistakes, he is also shown as deeply nationalistic, a representative Canadian, a nationalist who simply “could not give ... loyalty to the great Republic to the south” (50). Although Diefenbaker in his passionate nationalism has been accused of being anti-American, Grant asks us to consider instead that his stance “did not imply anti-Americanism, simply a lack of Americanism.... he was surely being honest to his own past when he said that he thought of his policies as being pro-Canadian, not anti-American” (50). In Grant's narrative, Diefenbaker represents something larger than himself, and “his inability to govern” is not simply a product of his own foibles and weaknesses; instead, it “is linked with the inability of this country to be sovereign” (25).

Not altogether surprisingly, given the resistant nature of Canadian identity rhetoric, the “authentic” Canadian portrayed in many of the discourses in the tradition is almost always in



some measure an outsider, an eccentric who is nevertheless distinguished by heroic acts of resistance. This figure is typically out of step with the prevailing mood of the time in attitude, insight, or action, and is frequently comic, sometimes tragic, and sometimes both at once. One need not look too far to see how well Diefenbaker fits this profile. Indeed, it would be hard to conceive of a more dramatically eccentric public character than Diefenbaker, in whose leadership the “leap to unquestioned power, the messianic stance applied to administrative detail, the prairie rhetoric murdering the television,” when combined with “a conception of Canada that threatened the dominant classes,” estranged him from the power politics of Ottawa (27).

Diefenbaker’s biographers describe him as “a westerner, an outsider, a romantic parliamentarian of the Edwardian era” (Smith xiii), a “renegade” who nevertheless “had a large, abiding love for his country” (Newman xii). He was a universally acknowledged “champion of the underdog [who] took office looking for dragons to slay” (Donaldson 192). His prairie roots, his suspicion of political deal-making, and “a kind of weird manic grandeur” (Hutchinson 316) helped to render him “a man out of time and place in late twentieth-century Ottawa” (Smith xiii)—in just exactly the same way that Canada’s traditional “conservative idea of social order,” which he so embodied, was incompatible with “the religion of progress and the emancipated passions” that marks American corporate liberalism (Grant 72). Grant elaborates: “The impossibility of conservatism in our era is the impossibility of Canada. As Canadians we attempted a ridiculous task in trying to build a conservative nation in the age of progress, on a continent we share with the most dynamic nation on earth. The current of modern history was against us” (25-26).

The tale told by Grant, then, is an essentially tragic one. It is the story of “the defeat of Canadian nationalism,” but it is no abstract depiction. Instead, the story of loss is personalized

and its sadness heightened by the portrayal of its hero as a man of honour, but flawed, a man of “deep loyalty,” who nevertheless found himself “impotent in the face of [the] disappearing past” (49). Unlike media portrayals of the time, however, Grant’s project is not intended to reduce public issues to “foibles of personality” (27). In fact, he attempts the opposite by embodying the fate of the country in the defeat of the man, and in the process he infuses both with high seriousness and tragic power.

Diefenbaker’s profound sense of nationalism is shown to have been anchored in a tradition that had provided a “counter-thrust to the pull of continentalism,” and enabled the country to exist at all (49). To a nationalist of his convictions, the idea of continentalism represented the surrender of Canada’s autonomy: “We shall be Canadians first, foremost, and always,” he intoned, “and our policies will be decided in Canada and not dictated by any other country” (quoted in Columbo 153). Unfortunately, his was a tradition fast disappearing, dissolving not only because of continentalist pressure from outside, but because of abandonment by the corporatist elites within the country. For years, as Grant points out, Diefenbaker’s more opportunistic Liberal predecessors “had been pursuing policies that led inexorably to the disappearance of Canada” by forging closer economic ties with the US. Sadly this course of action also ensured “the impossibility of an alternative to the American republic being built on the northern half of this continent” (25-26). There seems to be no doubt that Diefenbaker’s leadership failed, but this failure was as much a result of the cumulative effect of these policies as of his own character, a fact that Grant argues has been largely unrecognized by analysts and commentators: “No credit is given to the desperate attempts of Diefenbaker and his colleagues to find alternative policies, both national and international, to those of their predecessors” (26).

Whether Grant’s analysis of Diefenbaker’s failures would satisfy a political scientist or a

historian is not for me to say. What matters here is that what makes Diefenbaker the hero of Grant's tale is the very quality that reveals him to be flawed: "his nationalism ... a deeply held principle for which he would fight with great courage and would sacrifice political advantage" (43). While his rivals under Pearson adapted their policies "to suit the interests of the powerful, ... Diefenbaker was willing to bring the dominant classes of society down on his head." His downfall, Grant argues, is not the result simply, or even mainly, of self-pride; instead, it is the outcome of devotion to a nobler cause, to "that aspect of virtue known as love of country" (43). This devotion, combined with his status as an outsider and his eccentric, larger-than-life persona, makes him, in Grant's narrative, the quintessential hero in the tradition of Canadian identity rhetoric. Diefenbaker *is* Canada.

As Peter Emberly puts it, Diefenbaker's nationalism was noble because it was both genuine and anchored in "the conservative and communitarian strands in our heritage, once understood as containing enduring concepts of what is good for humanity" (19-20). It was a tradition that placed social order above the rights of the individual, and thus one that "stood in firm opposition to the Jeffersonian liberalism so dominant in the United States" (49-50). These are the "distinctive virtues" that underlie the Canadian social order, which in the age of progress may seem little more than "antiquarianism or romanticism, if not worse" (Emberly 20). Nevertheless, even now they remain central to public conceptions of Canadian difference.<sup>3</sup>

Every narrative needs an antagonist, and the forces opposed to Diefenbaker in this tale are "the Canadian establishment and its political instrument, the Liberal party" (53), who represent the Americanization of Canada through their commitment to continentalism and its

---

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Michael Adams, *Fire and Ice*; Pierre Berton, *Why We Act Like Canadians*; Richard Gwyn, *The 49<sup>th</sup> Paradox*; and Seymour M. Lipset, *Continental Divide*.

“process of universalization and homogenization” (11). Most of these “economically powerful” members of the new branch-plant economy “made more money by being the representatives of American capitalism and setting up the branch plants” than by maintaining Canadian independence (61), and to them nationalism is at best an unnecessary encumbrance, at worst an impediment to prosperity and progress. If Diefenbaker is the personification of an old-fashioned nationalism founded on Tory principles of collectivism and a “sense of the common good standing against capitalist individualism” (12-13), then the corporate elite represent the “homogenized culture of the American Empire” (26). Having embraced continentalist unification as both necessary and desirable, these elites stand to lose “nothing essential to the principle of their lives by losing their country” (61), for they are motivated by self-interest, by “individualist and capitalist greed” (13).

It is possible, Grant allows, that his tale might under other circumstances have had a happier ending. However, what would have been needed to bring this about is “an influential group that seriously desired the continuance of the country after 1940 [and that had] the animation of some political creed that differed from the capitalist liberalism of the United States. Only then could they have acted with sufficient decision to build an alternative nation on this continent” (61). Unfortunately, no such group existed among Canada’s new corporate elite, for whom it made sense that Canada, as “part of the total resources of North America [and] ... an undeveloped frontier within that total” (54), should willingly take its place as “part of the great North American civilization” (53). After all, according to corporate liberalist philosophy, “it is only in terms of such realities that our nation can be built. Only as a friendly satellite of the United States can we ... influence the American leaders to play their world role with skill and moderation. Doing this is not negating nationalism but recognizing its limits” (53). For these

people, Canada should, and must, be integrated into an economically unified continent with all barriers removed; to them, since the forty-ninth parallel has meaning only insofar as it “results in a lower standard of living for the majority to the north of it,” the sooner it is eliminated, the better (100). Simply put, “continentalism is the view of those who do not see what all the fuss is about. The purpose of life is consumption, and therefore the border is an anachronism” (100).

Hurtig recounts what is essentially the same tale of struggle and potential defeat; however, the outcome of Hurtig’s tale is less certain, since there yet remains a glimmer of hope that, despite the onslaught of American corporatist values, Canadians can maintain their distinctiveness and some shred of sovereignty. The hero of Hurtig’s tale differs from Grant’s, but the villainous forces are the same, and he spells them out in detail. They include

a selfish, grasping, and greedy plutocracy abandoning the work of generations of Canadians, and the dreams of the vast majority of people who live in this country, for American standards and values and priorities.... avaricious and arrogant CEOs, cowardly public servants, and myopic academics who couldn’t care less about national integrity, Canadian sovereignty and independence, or preserving the quality of life that has made Canada such a good country in the past. (xiii)

This group is made up of a “Canadian political and corporate establishment [who are] fixated on the United States” (249); it is, as Hurtig observes, the “corporate elite, our selfish plutocracy, our radical right, and our inept politicians [who] continue to sell our country” (303). As in Grant’s narrative, these people are driven by “arrogance [and] greed” (305) and have little concern for the survival of Canada (xi). Instead, they seek “the rapid integration of Canada with the United States ... the meshing of Canadian standards and policies with American policies, so that nothing stands in the way of their growing power” (xi). As a result of putting personal gain ahead of national interest, their actions are characterized by “self-serving well-financed

lobbying, and, frequently, grossly unprincipled and even illegal conduct, all seemingly without conscience” (302). This group includes “our current crop of corporate leaders and media magnates” (305) and far-right think tanks such as the Fraser Institute and the C.D. Howe Institute, as well as politicians like former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney “and friends” (351), “Jean Chretien’s Liberals [who] ... have been almost totally dominated by the agendas of big business” (405); and former Alliance leader and current Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who, “in his first major speech in the House of Commons ... presented the most pro-American agenda since Brian Mulroney” (413). In short, as in Grant’s book, the enemy is “the radical right, who are abandoning our country for their own personal gain” (432), and Canadians can surely “do much better than continuing to let these people dominate our government and run our country” (302).

Opposed to this group are the “we” of Hurtig’s text, himself and his readers, who—like Grant’s Diefenbaker—represent “the majority of Canadians,” and whose wishes differ significantly “from those of our radical-right plutocracy” (323). Like Hurtig himself, and unlike the neo-conservative supporters of Big Business, these people “care about the survival of Canada” (402), and their “love of country [is] combined with a respect for tradition” undreamed of by those who occupy positions of power “in our corporate boardrooms” (403-404). Unlike these forces of Big Business and the corporatist politicians, Hurtig and his readers do not want to see Canada and the Canadian way of life “subjugated to corporate control” (413). In fact, in stark contrast to the corporatist elites, Hurtig’s heroes “love [their] country and care deeply about its future” (433), and they want very much “to see it survive” (417). It is in their “visceral passion for this country” that Hurtig situates Canada’s strength, for this passion makes this group a “potentially indomitable force that could stop the sellout of Canada” (402). Thus, the hero of

Hurtig's book is not Hurtig himself, nor is it any other single champion. Instead, it is the "many, many millions more proud Canadians who love their country" (432) and who care about its survival. In short, the hero of Hurtig's as yet unfinished tale is the audience, whom he hopes "will go to work to help save our country, before it's too late" (xiv).

What makes Grant's and Hurtig's books interesting as documents in the tradition of Canadian identity rhetoric is their depiction of the central conflict of the Canadian experience as a struggle over core values—a dispute over what constitutes the good life. This same conflict fuels much of the rhetoric of Canadian identity, which can be seen as the ongoing attempt to retain "fragments of a way of life and ... remembrance of our foundations" (Emberly 20-21) that made "us" Canadians in the first place. "Canadians *are* different. And thank God for that," declares Hurtig (191), and what makes them different—as every Canadian knows—is a commitment to "social policy ... as one of the foundation stones of national identity" (219). This is why so many Canadians point to health care as a defining feature of Canadian society. As important as health care is, however, what it stands for is more important still.

Grant distinguishes between what he terms an "ethic of self-restraint" and an "ethic of freedom" as the core elements in the struggle over values that defines the Canadian identity (72). A society organized by an ethic of self-restraint privileges public order, security, and tradition over the rights of the individual, and emphasizes a society's responsibility "to protect the public good against private freedom" (83). By contrast, a society organized by an ethic of freedom emphasizes individual rights, liberty, and exemption from government control. According to such a philosophy, "social order is a man-made convenience, and its only purpose is to increase freedom. What matters is that men shall be able to do what they want, when they want" (70). The two systems are philosophical and ethical opposites, offering incompatible visions of the good.

One ethic is that of an essentially conservative society, and the other an expression of revolutionary idealism. One provided the foundation for British North America, and the other gave birth to the American revolution. Grant explains, “The early leaders of British North America identified lack of public and personal restraint with the democratic Republic. Their conservatism was essentially the social doctrine that public order and tradition, in contrast to freedom and experiment, were central to the good life” (83). For both Grant and Hurtig, traditional conservative values provide a link to the past, and to the vision of difference and resistance on which Canada was built. As Grant recounts,

the generation of the 1920s took it for granted that they belonged to a nation. The character of the country was self-evident.... To be a Canadian was to be a unique species of North American.... We were grounded in the wisdom of Sir John A. Macdonald, who saw plainly more than a hundred years ago that the only threat to nationalism was from the South, not from across the sea. To be a Canadian was to build, along with the French, a more ordered and stable society than the liberal experiment in the United States. (25)

The problem for contemporary Canada is that its corporatist elite have abandoned that founding wisdom to embrace an American-style notion of freedom that has become almost a “religion of progress and the emancipated passions” (72). It is important to note that, although the members of this corporatist group are frequently referred to as “conservatives,” they are nothing of the sort, as both Grant and Hurtig are careful to emphasize. Grant explicitly distinguishes “the Americans who call themselves ‘Conservatives’” from true conservatives who hold to the Tory ethic of self-restraint on which Canada was built. In fact, he argues, the corporatist elite are not conservatives at all, but

old-fashioned liberals. They stand for the freedom of the individual to use his property as he wishes, and for a limited government which must keep out of the marketplace. Their concentration on freedom from governmental interference has more to do with nineteenth-century liberalism



than with traditional conservatism, which asserts the right of the community to restrain freedom in the name of the common good. (76-77)

Like Grant, Hurtig is at pains to draw out this important contrast between so-called “neo-conservatism” and traditional conservatism as represented by the old Progressive Conservative party, whose “distinctive hallmark ... [was] its respect for tradition combined with a love of country” (413). He quotes Dalton Camp, for whom “as a Tory Canadian, neo-conservatism is as alien ... as Marxism or fascism or Dadaism.” Far from reflecting traditional conservative values, according to Camp, neo-conservatism “rejects the idea of Canada and the ideals that have, for so long, been the inspiration for the kind of society that has become a political wonder of the world.” It is therefore, Camp says, “a mistake to call neo-conservatism anything other than the enemy of the society those of my generation built over the years since the war” (quoted in Hurtig 414).

In its repudiation of American-style capitalist values and assumptions, the tradition of Canadian identity rhetoric has often been dismissed as mean-spirited and bigoted American-bashing. Indeed, some have claimed that Canadian identity doesn’t even exist apart from its tradition of rampant anti-Americanism. Pierre Berton, for example, writes of “the latent anti-Americanism that has always simmered beneath the deceptively placid surface of Canada’s external relations (5-6); J.L. Granatstein argues that “Canadian anti-Americanism has for two centuries been a central buttress of the national identity” (4) and calls for an end to such “glib, mindless prejudice” (287).<sup>4</sup>

Others, however, have offered a somewhat different take on the subject of Canadian cultural resistance. Northrop Frye, for instance, argues that what is being resisted is not genuine

---

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Robert Fulford, “Anti-American Cant a Self-inflicted Wound”; Jamie Glazov, “The Sickness of Canadian Anti-Americanism”; and Theodore Plantinga, “Anti Americanism and Canadian Identity.”

American culture and values but the debasement of these same values into an instrument for unrestrained corporate advantage and greed. Indeed, far from being anti-American, Canadian resistance may even be “in the United States’ best interests” (“Conclusion” 75), since the oppositional themes in Canada’s rhetoric of identity are really directed at a pervasive “anonymous, mass-produced, mindless sub-culture ... dominated by advertising and distributed through the mass media ... [whose] effect on American culture is quite as lethal as its effect everywhere else” (“Sharing” 64). Although Canadians are used to thinking of such corporatist, mass-culture messages as “an Americanizing influence,” Frye argues that corporatist mass culture is a product of industrialization, and therefore “is American only to the extent that the United States is the world’s most highly industrialized society” (“Sharing” 64).

As Hurtig points out, it isn’t just Canadians who reject the corporatist agenda; many Americans question it as well. In fact, as many “anti-American criticisms originat[e] from respected American sources, people who love their country, but despair over what has been happening to it” (185) as from Canadian sources, an assertion confirmed by, for example, the work of Michael Moore, Gore Vidal, or Lewis Lapham. In resisting corporate liberalism, Canadians are, in effect, joining thoughtful American critics of those who attempt “to hijack the American dream for [their] own selfish reasons” (Willis xii). In fact, Canadians may even have an important role to play in this regard, as Marshall McLuhan suggests, since “sharing the American way, without commitment to American goals or responsibilities, makes the Canadian intellectually detached and observant as an interpreter of the American destiny” (McLuhan 226-48).

Indeed, given Canada’s position on the fringes of the empire, its branch-plant status, and

its distinctive core values, it would surely be more surprising if its cultural discourses were *not* flavoured by anti-Americanism, since all human identities are built up by dissociation as well as by association. As John Fiske explains, all social allegiances rely on a vigorous “sense of oppositionality,” having “not only a sense of *with whom* but also of *against whom*” (24). Kenneth Burke calls this process “identification by antithesis,” noting that all identity formation necessarily involves not only “congregation” but also “related norms of differentiation” (268). In fact, Burke argues, we cannot fully understand identity formation *unless* we recognize the inescapable extent to which every “‘unification’ implies [a corresponding] *diversity*” (Burke 271).

Thus, Canadians’ insistence on their differences is not simply “mindless prejudice” but an attempt to reclaim a system of value that is largely incompatible with the corporate world order that forms the larger context. This theme is persistent enough to have become what Norman Fairclough calls an “anti-language”—a cultural code that provides a “conscious alternative” to the codes and forms of the dominant culture (91). As such, it provides a means of repudiating its influence and asserting at the same time an alternate set of values. While all cultures incorporate a sense of the other, anti-languages are an especially prominent feature of cultural identification for marginalized cultures, and as long as Canadians remain subservient—or, the more subservient they become—they can expect such passionately resistant discourse patterns to persist. As Grant explains,

national articulation is a process through which human beings form and re-form themselves into a society to act historically. This process coheres around the intention realized in the action.... But a nation does not remain a nation only because it has roots in the past. Memory is never enough to guarantee that a nation can articulate itself in the present. There must be a thrust of intention into

the future. When the nation is the intimate neighbour of a dynamic empire, this necessity is even more obvious. (31)

Hurtig, though less philosophical and more pragmatic, responds to the same impulse of repetition and re-enactment. “I have written on many of these subjects before,” he observes, but he notes that he is prompted to repeat and elaborate these same themes because of “the degree of pessimism about the survival of Canada” that he sees around him (xiv). By re-enacting the cultural pattern, he also shows himself a member of a community of voices, and his book is filled with the quoted comments of others in the same Canadian community. Hurtig and Grant, in fulfilling a recognizable pattern in the rhetoric of Canadian identity, both establish themselves within the tradition and provide a ritualized affirmation for their readers.

As I have elaborated elsewhere (MacLennan, “Dancing”), the repudiative rhetoric of Canadian identity is not, as some appear to have supposed, an instrumental rhetoric aimed at challenging American attitudes. Instead, as with all rhetorics of identity, it is an epideictic genre intended to celebrate and affirm identity for those within the culture, and its repudiative patterns are not antagonistic but agonistic—a form, in the words of Northrop Frye, “of Canadian self-definition.” Echoing Burke’s notion of “identification by antithesis,” Frye argues that “identity is only identity when it becomes, not militant, but a way of defining oneself against something else” (“Conclusion” 75)—against, in this context, meaning “simply ... differentiation” (86). Canadian identity can only be defined and confirmed as figure in the context of the pervasive and inescapable American ground against which Canada finds itself as an unalterable fact of Canadian existence.

But a question still arises. If such discourses function, in the words of Berton, as “a necessary form of cultural protectionism” (9), then we are forced to ask: protection from what? It’s tempting to respond that the answer is obvious; it’s American capitalist expansionism that

Canadians need protection from. However, lurking about the edges of every discourse in this tradition that I have studied is another possibility, one hinted at by Margaret Atwood when she declares that “it is our eagerness to sell that needs attention” (“Travels” 113).

Perhaps, after all, the epideictic rhetoric of Canadian identity does have a greater symbolic purpose. While it is undoubtedly intended to affirm a Canadian sense of identity through its ritual enactment of a familiar cultural pattern, it also persistently attempts to draw Canadians’ attention to what they might prefer not to recognize, that the enemy is inside the gates, that it is not Americans but Canadians who are so busily “dismembering our country” (Hurtig 324). They are contemptible, they are self-serving and greedy, and they care nothing for Canada, but they are nevertheless “*our* corporate elite, *our* selfish plutocracy, *our* radical right, and *our* inept politicians,” as Hurtig points out (303).

This same point is made by both Grant and Hurtig; although it is American-style values that present the threat to Canadian independence and survival, it is not in this case Americans who are wielding them. It is not Americans who have the power to sell out the country or undermine its integrity; instead, it is those self-interested corporatist Canadians who do not care about preserving Canadian traditions, values, and social structures. Canada’s challenge is that Canadians are, whether they like it or not, and no matter how peripherally, participants in a larger culture, whose central values Canadians have provisionally embraced in exchange for the prosperity afforded by their ties with the American empire. Canadians have accepted “all the advantages of that empire.... Yet, because [they] have formal political independence, [they] can keep out of some of the dirty work necessary to that empire” (Grant 11). Canadians have imagined that they can continue to hold onto their own values of collectivism and social responsibility, and to believe that they are, and can remain, different from their economic

masters.

As Grant points out, “the central problem for nationalism in English-speaking Canada has always been: in what ways and for what reasons do we have the power and the desire to maintain some independence of the American empire?” (9). The affirmation of a Canadian vision and Canadian values, the repudiation of revolutionary idealism and corporate liberalism that it entails, is an attempt to come to terms with this central problem at a time when it seems as though Canada has relinquished both the power and the desire. But as Margaret Laurence once observed, people who feel that hope is irretrievably lost do not write books (Lever 31), and in a sense the answer to Grant’s question lies in its asking. Part of the tradition that Canadians so desperately want to preserve is the tradition that these books are part of, as well as the one they discuss. Canadians cannot hope to retain our differences if they have forgotten what those differences are; Canadians cannot ever have the power to resist total assimilation if they have no reason to desire it. “It is a disadvantage these days for any general thesis to be tied to past events,” Grant warns, “because ... our memories are killed in the flickering images of the media, and the seeming intensity of events” (9). But memory and tradition can be preserved, if they continue to be articulated and affirmed.

What this means is that the rhetoric of Canadian identity provides one final stroke of irony, for part of the identity we so desperately want to discover lies in the very discourses through which the search is conducted. Despite its sometimes quite harsh repudiation of the American other, the rhetoric of Canadian identity has never been primarily an exercise in anti-Americanism, for the simple reason that it has never really been about Americans. Instead, it is about Canada, about Canadians reminding themselves of who they are and where they have come from, about renewing and communicating to subsequent generations of Canadians the

values that made Canada's forebears reject the republic in the first place.

In the end, Canada's hope of resistance to total assimilation lies in Canadians' capacity to remember. Writing about the necessity of resistance is itself an act of resistance—to the failure of memory, to the loss of understanding of what it means to be a “unique species of North American” (Grant 25). In writing about collective loss, what has been lost may be found; in writing about the irretrievable, what has been taken away may be yet be recovered. And if the rhetoric of Canadian identity has anything to teach, it is this: the day that a uniquely Canadian tradition is truly lost will be the day on which Canadians can no longer wonder where it has gone.

## Works Cited

- Adams, Michael. *Fire and Ice: The United States, Canada, and the Myth of Converging Values*. Toronto: Penguin, 2003.
- Atwood, Margaret. "Canadian-American Relations." *Second Words*. Toronto: Anansi, 1982. 371-92.
- . *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. Toronto: Anansi, 1972.
- . "Travels Back." *Second Words*. Toronto: Anansi, 1982. 107-128.
- Barlow, Maude. *Parcel of Rogues: How Free Trade Is Failing Canada*. Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1990.
- Barlow, Maude, and Bruce Campbell. *Take Back the Nation*. Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1991.
- Berton, Pierre. *Why We Act Like Canadians*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982.
- . *Why We Act Like Canadians*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Toronto: McClelland, 1987.
- Bowker, Marjorie Montgomery. *On Guard for Thee: An Independent Review of the Free Trade Agreement*. Ottawa-Hull: Voyageur, 1988.
- Braid, Don, and Sydney Sharpe. *Breakup: Why the West Feels Left Out of Canada*. Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1990.
- Burke, Kenneth. "The Rhetorical Situation." *Communication: Ethical and Moral Issues*. Ed. Lee Thayer. London: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1973. 263-275.
- Cameron, Duncan, ed. *The Free Trade Papers*. Toronto: Lorimer, 1986.
- Clark, Joe. *A Nation Too Good to Lose*. Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1994.
- Columbo, John Robert, ed. *Colombo's Canadian Quotations*. Edmonton: Hurtig, 1974.
- Donaldson, Gordon. *The Prime Ministers of Canada*. Toronto: Doubleday, 1994.
- Dorland, Michael. Introduction. *The Cultural Industries of Canada*. Toronto: Lorimer, 1996.



- Emberly, Peter C. Foreword. *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism*. By George Grant. Montreal: McGill-Queens UP, 1994.
- Fairclough, Norman. *Language and Power*. New York: Longman, 1989.
- Fiske, John. *Understanding Popular Culture*. London: Methuen, 1989.
- Frye, Northrop. "Conclusion to *A Literary History of Canada*." *Divisions on a Ground*. Toronto: Anansi, 1982. 71-90.
- . "Sharing the Continent." *Divisions on a Ground*. Toronto: Anansi, 1982. 57-70.
- Fulford, Robert. "Anti-American Cant a Self-inflicted Wound." *National Post* 22 September 2001. Rpt. at Robert Fulford, personal website, <<http://www.robertfulford.com/AntiAmericanism2.html>>.
- Glazov, Jamie. "The Sickness of Canadian Anti-Americanism." *FrontPageMagazine.com* 7 March 2003, <[www.frontpagemag.com/Articles/Printable.asp?ID=6535](http://www.frontpagemag.com/Articles/Printable.asp?ID=6535)>.
- Gordon, Charles. "Canada's Imminent Breakup." *Maclean's* 26 September 1994: 13.
- Granatstein, Jack L. *Yankee Go Home? Canadians and Anti-Americanism*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 1996.
- Grant, George. *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1965.
- Gwyn, Richard. *The 49<sup>th</sup> Paradox: Canada in North America*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985.
- Hurtig, Mel. *The Vanishing Country: Is It Too Late to Save Canada?* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2002.
- Hutchinson, Bruce. "The Lost Prophet." *Mr. Prime Minister: 1867-1964*. Toronto: Longmans, 1964.

- Lapham, Lewis. *Gag Rule*. New York: Penguin, 2004.
- . *Waiting for the Barbarians*. New York: Verso Press, 1997.
- Lever, Bernice. "Literature and Canadian Culture: An Interview with Margaret Laurence." *Margaret Laurence: The Writer and Her Critics*. Toronto: McGraw Hill Ryerson, 1977.
- Lipset, Seymour M. *Continental Divide: The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- MacLennan, Jennifer. "Dancing with the Neighbours." *Re-Imagining Borders: Canada-United States Relations since 1800*. Ed. John Herd Thompson and Michael D. Behiels. Vancouver: UBC Press, forthcoming.
- MacLennan, Jennifer. "The 'Authentic' Canadian as Cultural Hero: Stompin' Tom's Before the Fame." *Arachne* 7 (2000).
- . "I Can't See the Difference, Can You See the Difference? Canadians, Americans, and the Discourse of Resistance." Paper presented at the Conference of the Northwest Communication Association, April 2001, Coeur D'Alene, ID.
- . "Life on the Rock: Island and Identity in Mary Walsh's 'A Hymn to Canada.'" Paper presented at the Conference of the Canadian Society for the Study of Rhetoric, May 2003, Halifax, NS.
- . "The Voice of Margaret Atwood: Personal Narrative as Rhetorical Strategy in Survival." Modern Languages Association Convention, December 1993, Toronto, ON.
- McDonald, Marci. *Yankee Doodle Dandy: Brian Mulroney and the American Agenda*. Toronto: Stoddart, 1995.
- McLuhan, Marshall. "Canada: The Borderline Case." *The Canadian Imagination*. Ed. David Staines. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977. 226-48.

- Moore, Michael. *The Awful Truth*. Videotape. New York: New Video Group, 2002.
- . *Dude, Where's My Country?* New York: Time Warner Publishing, 2003.
- Newman, Peter C. *Renegade in Power: The Diefenbaker Years*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1963.
- Orchard, David. *The Fight for Canada: Four Centuries of Resistance to American Expansionism*. Toronto: Stoddart, 1993.
- Plantinga, Theodore. "Anti-Americanism and Canadian Identity" *Myodicy* 3 (April 1997): <<http://www.redeemer.on.ca/~tplanti/m/MAM.HTM#>>.
- Smith, Denis. *Rogue Tory: The Life and Legend of John G. Diefenbaker*. Toronto: McFarlane, Walter, and Ross, 1995.
- Vidal, Gore. *The Decline and Fall of the American Empire*. Monroe, ME: Odonian Press, 1992.
- . *Imperial America: Reflections on the United States of Amnesia*. Berkeley: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2004.
- Willis, Clint. "Introduction." *The I Hate Republicans Reader: Why the GOP Is Totally Wrong about Everything*. Ed. Clint Willis. Berkeley: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003.