
Desiring Canada: CBC Contests, Hockey Violence,
and Other Stately Pleasures

Patricia Cormack / James F. Cosgrave

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Especially for those of us who do not live in Canada, *Desiring Canada: CBC Contests, Hockey Violence, and Other Stately Pleasures* is an ideal book. Patricia Cormack and James F. Cosgrave write clearly, energetically and intelligently of the lowbrow popular culture that usually flies below the Central European radar. In Brno or Budapest or Bucharest, academics know Thomas Haliburton and Tomson Highway, but not necessarily Tim Hortons. Moodie and Munro are household names in the halls of academe, but Mercer? Who's that joker? *Desiring Canada* fills many of these cultural gaps as its authors introduce and cleverly “examine everyday pleasures, Canadian identity, and the state” (17).

Like many texts, *Desiring Canada* begins with an epigraph by Pierre Trudeau – namely, his 1967 line “There’s no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation.” Unlike many books, *Desiring Canada* does something interesting with the quip. As long as there’s a television in the nation’s bedrooms, the state-funded Canadian Broadcasting Corporation does have its place there and plays its part in regulating our wants and concepts of Canada. “Canadian identity,” we learn, “is one of desire, and desire is by definition always incomplete” (212). In other words, the publicly-funded CBC helps to flesh out concepts of Canada, entailing that “the state has only *appeared to disappear* from the interest in citizens’ pleasure” (212).

The five body chapters are neatly woven together and focus on: 1) two recent CBC contests (“Seven Wonders of Canada” and “49 Songs from North of the 49th Parallel,” which set out to choose a playlist for newly-elected President Barack Obama); 2) the Tim Hortons coffee phenomenon; 3) ice hockey and televised spectacles of violence; 4) “Peace, Order and Good Gambling”; and 5) CBC comedy. *Desiring Canada* is a model for academic writing. The arguments and writing are clear, endnotes are delightfully sparse and sometimes funny, the index is well-organized, and Cormack and Cosgrave provide concise information and background on, for example, the oft-ridiculed MAPL rules for what makes music Canadian. This saves us from having to slog through such



documentation and regulations on our own. Most importantly, the authors provide clear rationale for the choice of material in each chapter. Pop culture is, well, *big*. What to look at? They tell us what and why.

Central European Canadianists will probably learn most from chapters 1 and 2, “Contesting Canada at the CBC” and “‘Always Fresh, Always There’: Tim Hortons and the Consumer-Citizen.” First, the second chapter, the one about the strange affinity for coffee and donuts (curiously, *not* the “doughnuts” I spelled and consumed as a child). Named after a professional hockey player, the private company Tim Hortons has gradually and stealthily become a symbol of Canada: “Because coffee consumption is so socially and politically charged,” the authors inform us, “it is almost impossible to consume coffee in a public space without making a statement about oneself” (70). If that statement sounds absurd or delusional, just ask a Canadian how true it has become: Cormack and Cosgrave prove that choosing Tim Hortons over Starbucks is like choosing Gordon Lightfoot over Miles Davis. Politicians are always careful to include a photo op at a Tim Hortons, the Department of National Defence has played a role in getting the chain’s beans to troops in Afghanistan, and, perhaps most masterfully, using the power of the internet, “Tim Hortons cleverly gets its customers to do its talking, with profound implications for story-telling’s place in Canadian identity” (85). The “Every Cup Tells a Story” website invites customers (good Canadians, all) to post how and why Tim Hortons has been a part of their lives. Though it’s easy to be cynical about such capitalist ventures, many of the stories at www.everycup.ca are indeed heart-warming and – dare one say it? – *typically Canadian*.

In chapter 1, Cormack and Cosgrave provide close analyses of contests aiming to pick the best Canadian places and the ideal Canadian music to fill “Obama’s playlist.” Each of these contests could or should have been a popular celebration of Canada, not least because regular folks did much of the voting. (For the record, the winners were: the canoe, the igloo, Niagara Falls, Old Quebec, Halifax’s Pier 21, where many immigrants first set foot on Canadian soil, prairie skies, and the Rockies). There was, however, a jury and a set of rules, and online commentators took the opportunity to nit-pick everything from jury selection to eligibility to selection criteria. “This is a travesty. A joke without humour,” said one. Commenting and kvetching are often one and the same in online forums, but even so Canadians seem a rather litigious, morose people. This general dourness is musically redeemed by at least one comic song, as the authors provide a nuanced reading of The Arrogant Worms’ classic “Canada Is Really Big” – a song which is exceptional “because it pokes fun at the Canadian pursuit of identity through the sheer occupation of empty space” (52). It’s as if the comic band was in collusion with the authors, so apt it is in supporting Cormack and Cosgrave’s desire-as-lack argument.

The title of the final body chapter, “The Funny State Apparatus,” is slightly misleading because the chapter focuses almost exclusively on comedian Rick Mercer (to be



fair, the authors are upfront about this exclusivity). Mercer's shows and routines are firmly entrenched within the CBC's programming, and most Canadians will remember such fine acts as "Talking to Americans," where unsuspecting victims flaunt their Canada-ignorance. In mock-reporter mode Mercer asks innocent Americans to opine on Canada's lack of paved roads or the atrocious Toronto Polar Bear Slaughter. Mercer, though, does not specialize solely in anti-American gags that stoke the Canadian ego. "In his role as CBC comedian, he appears as the court jester who has some licence to criticize the powerful" (210). For example, he once spearheaded a movement to have politician Stockwell Day renamed "Doris Day." The joke behind the joke? "[A]ccording to the rules Day himself had proposed," Mercer's petition "would have compelled him to change his name" (194). In his weekly rant Mercer "generates laughs by exposing the ridiculous reasoning and behaviour of politicians" (190) and other bigwigs. But as the sociologist duo points out, Mercer's comedy is not quite as simple and subversive as that. When not taking down foolish politicians, Rick Mercer shows his loyalty for the Canadian military and other instruments of formal authority. Moreover, politicians often appear with him, making Mercer's critiques seem more like gentle teasing than scathing ridicule. For what politician would agree to appear on a comedy show that was truly dangerous?

The two other chapters – namely, on hockey violence (chapter 3) and gambling (chapter 4) – though insightful, will probably be of less interest to most Central European Canadianists. That said, Cormack and Cosgrave's thorough analysis of gambling practices and state or provincial control of the same is downright spooky. After citing a government ad that gloats over how much money gambling brings in, the authors harpoon this doublespeak, deadpanning, "Apparently one is to conclude that gambling is good for Canadians" (158).

The chapter on hockey and hockey violence provides a concise and rewarding overview of sport as a civilizing process and of how, at the same time, the state is a co-celebrant in hockey violence because it highlights the game on Hockey Night in Canada, the CBC's longest-running show. The authors' examination of the CBC's fight-happy commentator Don Cherry, with his flashy suits and flashier viewpoints, is the best out there. If the CBC is the most politically correct entity around, their most famous character is the least. Cherry is often unfairly ridiculed as a philistine, a blissfully unaware throwback to an earlier "manlier" time. This is not the case, and when Cherry "begins his comments with a phrase like 'I'm gunna get in trouble for this,'" he is in fact occupying a "rhetorical position" from which "he says what is outside 'politically correct' official discourse" (129), broadcasting his personal views on Christmas and the military, among other things, while ostensibly not "really" belonging to the CBC.

These are tough fiscal times, but Canadian Studies libraries should find a few dollars for *Desiring Canada*.