Canadian Anthropologists, the First Nations and Canada's Self-Image at the Millennium

Regna Darnell   *University of Western Ontario*

Abstract: Canadian anthropology attains its unique character by virtue of the discipline's embedding in debates over Canadian national identity and unity. This paper explores Canadian national identity in relation to the First Nations as a third founding force dissolving the binary of French vs. English. First Nations values, it is argued, must be incorporated within the reflexive self-image of Canada, both in interests of social justice for the First Nations and as part of what makes Canada a richly complex intersection of standpoints (ethnic, class, regional, etc.). As a result of this social and cultural complexity, Canada is ideally poised to meet the challenges of globalization and Canadian anthropologists are well-situated to mediate and explicate this process.

Résumé: L'anthropologie canadienne acquiert sa distinction du fait de l'insertion de la discipline dans des débats sur l'identité et l'unité nationale canadienne. Le présent article explore l'identité canadienne par rapport aux Premières Nations comme une troisième force fondatrice tendant à dissoudre la tension binaire entre français et anglais. Il soutient que les valeurs des Premières Nations doivent être incorporées à l'image que le Canada projette de lui-même, à la fois dans l'intérêt de la justice sociale pour les Premières Nations et en tant que composante de ce qui fait du Canada une intersection de perspectives d'une grande richesse (ethnique, de classe, régionale, etc.). Comme résultat de cette complexité sociale et culturelle, le Canada est placé dans une situation idéale pour faire face aux défis de la globalisation et les anthropologues canadiens sont bien placés pour médiatiser et expliquer ce processus.

The Canadian national character has consistently denied simple definition. Politicians, civil servants, historians, literary scholars, and ordinary citizens alike bemoan the inherent complexities and contradictions of the Canadian predicament while simultaneously defending the Canadian way of life against all external critique. Paradoxically, Canadians seem to take pride in not naming or pinning down their common sense of identity.

Canada's difference, implicitly measured in relation to the United States, often appears nearly invisible. At least on the surface, its culture is non-exotic and its variability can be subsumed under the overarching binary of French versus English. The unintelligibility of the not-quite-other plays out within anthropological discourse, in internal politics, and in international relations. From an American standpoint, disparity in economic power discourages intense strategic attention to aligning Canadian policies with American interests; compliance can usually be taken for granted. From a Canadian point of view, however, dependency on the United States is the salient reality of everyday life, the national nightmare.

A brief examination of some representative Canadian versions of the so-called national unity or national identity debate will demonstrate how integral the First Nations, and a more general acknowledgment of internal diversity, are to Canada's vision of itself. We will then turn to how this anthropologist has come to think about Canada as an anthropological problem.[1] A characteristic anthropological (that is, cross-cultural and comparative) framework focusses on the oddity of Canada, defamiliarizing the national imagination through ethnographic examination of some of the country's multiple and cross-cutting constituent communities. From such a perspective, Canadian social cohesion resides precisely in the intersecting binaries which divide Canada along multiple axes. The nation itself consists in a working out of the implications of these variable standpoints, defined by situationally specified contrasts and subject to shift of position at a moment's notice—or so it may seem to the

hapless outsider attempting to get a handle on how things work. Once one stops expecting alliances and dimensions of identity to stand still, the underlying pattern within which shifts occur begins to emerge and the (external) observer's sense of aberration abates. To the insider, in contrast, the slippery nature of shifting binaries seems perfectly natural, even predictable.

Having proposed a model for thinking anthropologically about Canada, we will then turn to a concrete example of how Canada constructs its own diversity and unity at the level of the national imaginary. The 1996 report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (hereafter RCAP) exemplifies the political process whereby Canadians both envision and re-envision their nation. RCAP's version of First Nations values will be argued to articulate them to the Canadian penchant for social cohesion based on small-scale, local, and intermeshed patterns of identity.

Some provisos: other communities could have been chosen to illustrate the negotiation of variable standpoints within the Canadian polity. Nonetheless, the First Nations are unique: neither immigrants nor European founders, they were here first. For all Canadians, their existence distinguishes the new world from the old. Other institutions for First Nations negotiation of full participation in national public life and prosperity could have represented the First Nations in relation to Canada. The method of deploying an anthropological and ethnographic approach to Canadian national identity could easily be expanded to other exemplars. Indeed, I hope to do so in other contexts.

The Canadian National Identity Debate

The Canadian national culture includes salient awareness of the First Nations. Through a characteristic appropriation of Aboriginal voice, the claim of the native-born to be "Native," "indigenous" or occasionally even "Aboriginal," distinguishes Canadians from their European forebears or powerful southern neighbours, but hardly endears them to the peoples who lived here from the times immemorial of oral tradition. The Canadian cultural discourse sounds remarkably anthropological, albeit perhaps the anthropology is that of an earlier and more optimistic era. "Canadian culture," "the Canadian psyche" and "the Canadian national character" all make assumptions about the homogeneity of the Canadian self-image that most contemporary anthropologists would doubtless want to reformulate in terms of the social structural and psychological complexity of the nation-state and its constituent communities in an era of globalization (cf., for example, Herzfeld, 1987; Verdery, 1991).

Margaret Atwood's classic rendition of Canada's fragmented national identity relies on a series of linked metaphors: American is to Indian as Indian is to Canadian; Indian is to French Canadian as French Canadian is to English Canadian; Indian is to early settlers as early settlers are to later immigrants (1972: 100, 149). In the language of anthropological analysis, relations of power in Canada operate in structurally parallel ways with different groups holding variable positions, depending on context and historical period. Moreover, Indians are linked with wild animals, locking the Canadian imagination into the "garrison mentality" of a bush environment which resists efforts to domesticate it into a garden (Frye, 1971). Atwood (1972), in the height of a highly realistic Canadian phobia over encroaching Americanization, identified a Canadian strategy of set-up for failure arising from colonial victimization. Simultaneously she exhorted fellow-Canadians to transcend the insecurities of their beleaguered history by moving through a series of four characteristic strategies, from failure to acknowledge victim status to taking responsibility for their national destiny.

One would not expect such an ambivalent self-definition to produce a confident and extroverted national character; and indeed, it has not. When the essence of an individual is hard to pin down, Atwood's "survival" as the nirvana of the Canadian imagination must be located in a communal identity with multiple structural positions rather than in any essentialized individual (or role position) standing alone. Non-Native Canadians thus appropriate identities, or at least empathies, from a safe position in a dominant symbolic construct of communal nation-ness. Canadians are correct that they are neither Europeans nor Americans, while outsiders continue to find Canada unintelligible.

For John Ralston Saul, the psychology of Canadian as victim rapidly gives way to "a triangular reality" (1997: 81-100) in which Canada continues to function precisely because the First Nations provide a critical balance between French and English solitudes. Canada is intriguing for "its complexity; its refusal of the conforming, monolithic nineteenth-century nation-state model" (1997: 81); having three rather than two founding nations, he argues, facilitates an inclusive social mythology with a tensile strength impossible for a binary structure. Saul further suggests that the ineluctable presence of the First Nations ensures maintenance of nomadism as a strategy for settlement and attachment to land which is compatible with the existence of civilization (1997: 82). Succeeding waves of settlement, including immigrants as well as the three founding nations, have retained the character of their

particularized experiences. In order to escape self-denial, then, national identity must build on appropriation of the vitality of constituent communities by the dominant culture (1997: 98) (despite the problematic withholding of consent to such appropriation by the First Nations). Saul goes on to talk about animism, environmentalism, balance and oral tradition as First Nations wisdoms claimed by the holistic imagination of the Canadian mainstream. These, of course, are anthropological concepts as well as labels for First Nations values and cultural practices. Saul suggests these values are both shared by the First Nations and the Canadian mainstream and fit with a robust conceptualization of Canadian national identity.

Although Saul speaks primarily about Anglophone Canada, similar contrasts and balances, indeed parallel and persistent miscommunications, also characterize the French/English divide. What Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (1993) calls "deep diversity" lies at the heart of Quebec's desire to maintain a "distinct society." The federalism he so passionately espouses can function only if English Canada can accept the legitimacy of the impulse to a Francophone cultural particularity unique within the national polity; he takes it upon himself to explain to the polarized communities why they must learn to think from the standpoint of the other.

The immigrant-dominated culture of the prairies challenges the possibility of a homogenous national imaginary in a different way. Despite repeated laments in public discourse about the centrifugal tendencies of multiple ethnic solidarities, multiculturalism in Canada has worked surprisingly well through respect for ethnocultural diversity. Will Kymlicka (1989, 1998) argues that, as long as the state remains morally neutral, distinct cultural communities are compatible with liberal democracy linking stable but interacting constituents of the Canadian state.

Not all commentators, of course, are so optimistic. Ian Angus (1997), for example, emphasizes forces of postcolonialism and economic globalization that seem increasingly to preclude a public discourse of majority tolerance for multiple minority cultures within the Canadian state. His nostalgia for an older Anglophone left-liberalism implies lack of agency among traditional cultural elites in the present predicament of Canadian diversity confronted with rapid change. (Saul reasons similarly about the present challenges to individual and national autonomy but concludes with a clarion call to resist homogenization and dilution of traditional Canadian political values.)

I suggest that Canadian anthropologists at the Millennium can and should use their ethnographic expertise to link the complexity and ambiguity of the Canadian

experience to the possibility of proud and self-confident national identity. Although NAFTA has posed the threat of Americanization in new terms, more economic than cultural, Canadian commentators have emphasized culture and values, areas in which individuals and cultural communities more easily exercise autonomy. In many ways, Canadian uncertainties resonate well with the contemporary postmodern theoretical climate. Jean-François Lyotard wrote *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) at the behest of the Quebec government. Canadians, Francophone or Anglophone, are accustomed to living with ambiguity and to not envisioning themselves at the centre of the world. The national attitude is a characteristically anthropological one, which cries out for anthropological analysis.

Many things change when one crosses the world's longest undefended border. Scale is a critical variable in the non-American-ness of the Canadian psyche. The scale of Canadian society encourages a personalistic national imagination, particularly accessible to anthropologists who have worked in small communities and can elaborate the parameters of identification with and beyond the local. Benedict Anderson (1983) has formulated the dilemma of social order in terms of the human capacity to leap from empathy with known persons in a face-to-face community to assuming others are sufficiently like oneself to merit identification, e.g., within a nation-state. Participant-observation fieldwork enjoins anthropologists to contextualize complexity of community in relation to the Canadian sense of nation.

Canadians see themselves as embodiments of practical common sense, avoiding "political excess." In self-representation, they embrace a brokerage theory of politics, an "end to ideology" in which political parties appropriately represent regions and interest groups. Compromise appeals more than liberalism or convervatism per se. New Democratic Party socialism runs a distant third, functioning as an elusive social conscience and destabilizing the dominant position at any given point in time (Christian and Campbell, 1990). Accommodation is preferable to resolution because already poised for deniability or reversal.

Political scientist Carolyn Tuohy calls it "institutionalized ambivalence"; in her view, Canadian institutions are distinctive because principles which appear contradictory are embodied in institutional and procedural structures ambiguous enough to change over time in response to contexts and applications. The structure itself can be seen as consistent and unchanging, although social practices gradually come to have an entirely new flavour.

William Christian and Colin Campbell argue that Toryism, now recessive to liberalism, at least at the fed-

eral level, distinguishes Canadian political ideology from American. Canadian Tories maintain a British and feudal commitment to place "social order and collective or community values before individual rights" (1990: 9). This Tory strain invokes hierarchy, social inequality, continuities from the British tradition, deference to authority, the absence of a true frontier and an inexplicable fondness for government intervention. There is more of *noblesse oblige* than populism in this stance, especially in Quebec. Moreover, at least in relation to the American emphasis on individual rights, it is consistent with the communal rights sought by First Nations as well as by Quebec and some ethnic communities. Compromise is admired as political strategy; Canadian politics is rarely a zero sum game, an important aspect of its tensile strength.

To take only one example of carefully constructed mediation of confrontation, the Supreme Court of Canada decision on the legality of Quebec secession (1998) was sufficiently ambiguous for both sides to claim victory. Unilateral action was not constitutional, but Canadian values of "order and stability, constitutionalism and the rules of law and respect for minorities" would enjoin Canada to respect a Quebec vote. The Court declined to recognize the French as "a people" on the basis that only acute colonial oppression would grant a right to secession on such grounds, thus avoiding commitment on whether the French were in fact a people. Respect for minorities included Aboriginal as well as French minorities, implying legitimate First Nations interests in questioning the present boundaries of the Province of Quebec. Rights cherished by the French had the highly threatening potential for extension to other minorities. Occam's razor was tidily deflected into balance and moderation, a characteristically Canadian strategy.

Such tolerance for alterity presumably works because Canadian self-perception as belonging to the majority is characteristically elusive. William New's *Borderlands* (1998) stresses that Quebec separatists are motivated by their hatred of Toronto and Ottawa. According to Saul: "very few Anglophones think of themselves as a minority faced by the United States" (1997: 129). Gaile McGregor suggests that "*all* Canadians feel themselves to be on the other side of the fence from power" (forthcoming: 116).

An Anthropologist at Work in Canada

The immediate instinct of a fieldworking anthropologist confronted with the public discourse on Canadian national identity is to model it in relation to the everyday experiences of Canadian cultural communities and their members. Although these communities are certainly diverse,

they are also interwoven with one another. Although I did not begin by thinking of myself as a student of Canada, my own experience has exposed the complexity and intersection of many standpoints that characterize the nation.

My initial encounters with the Canadian identity question were disquieting. Interactional sociologist Erving Goffman, with whom I studied as a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania, apparently delighted in my move to Edmonton in 1969, reminding me whenever we met thereafter, with considerable pride, that *he* was a Canadian (although he left after his undergraduate degree). Sociologist Gaile McGregor (1986) locates Goffman's Canadian-ness in his unconscious assumption that social relations are fraught with danger, that the individual self is beleaguered (cf. Atwood, 1972; Frye, 1971).

Authoritative definitions of Canadian-ness were relegated to outsiders, their very externality lending verisimilitude, however superficial. When I left for Edmonton, my mentor and friend, A. Irving ("Pete") Hallowell, whose Berens River Ojibwe ethnography still retains its explanatory power, told me: "It's cold up there" and "I learned to ride a horse in Edmonton, in 1925." Canada was imagined as the frozen North: in the highly ambivalent words of our national anthem, "the true north, strong and free." This popular image declines to confront the demographic reality that two-thirds of the Canadian population lives huddled along its southern border shared with the United States. The garrison mentality reigns over "our home and native land."

Anthropological ancestor Margaret Mead, whose intuitive pronouncements on national character were legendary, reportedly quipped on multiple occasions that Canada was the hardest country for her to study. On the surface, things seemed familiar. Then she would realize that she did not understand at all. However bizarre the national character methodology seems to anthropologists in retrospect, the underlying intuitions still bear examination. Moreover, the national character rhetoric is remarkably consonant with that of "proud to be Canadian."

The Canadian chicken, according to the traditional children's joke, was crossing the road to get to the middle. Canadians like the middle of the road. Canadian politics and culture emphasize non-confrontation, optimism (often against the dictates of common sense), and mediation of polar positions to encompass, however nominally, every conceivable standpoint. Although the short-term results often appear counter-intuitive, the chicken-in-the-middle-of-the-road strategy preserves a ground from which to meet any swing of the unpredictable pendulum that is social order. Irrevocable commitment to *any* position is somehow un-Canadian.

When I first began to talk about the history of Canadian anthropology in the mid-1970s, Canadian graduate students, confronted with faculty largely imported from elsewhere, mostly the United States, declined to accept responsibility for a home-grown anthropology under native-born control and direction. It was a failure of nerve as well as a lack of information about disciplinary history. My own work has demonstrated a highly characteristic combination of subdisciplines and specializations, although no single feature is uniquely Canadian. Disciplinary focus on the First Nations has persisted and far outweighs any other ethnographic commitment (Darnell, 1997; 1998). Although it seems clear, at least in retrospect, that something about Canada reshapes the anthropologists who came and stayed, few of them have turned to the study of Canadian society itself.

At the beginning of my career, the communities anthropologists studied were ideally conceived as ethnically homogeneous, neatly bounded and often isolated geographically. Ethnography, or cultural description based on participant-observation fieldwork, was a method well-suited to such units of analysis. In the intervening three decades, the anthropological concepts of culture and community have evolved considerably. Individuals move across community boundaries and embrace plural identities; communities themselves are dispersed across multiple and non-contiguous locations; and distinct affiliations are maintained in urban contexts. Anthropologists have adapted their methods accordingly. Ethnographies more often involve multiple field sites; consultants linked through the anthropologist need not form a group, never mind a distinct community (cf. Marcus, 1998). Nonetheless, traditional anthropological fieldwork methods still shed light on larger groups and identities—on the nature of the community beyond the local face-to-face interactions of everyday life. Public symbolic culture yields insight and access into the mainstream and its internal variability.

The hypothesis of cross-cutting standpoints in the ongoing construction of the Canadian nation, variably enacted among its cultural constituents, arises from three decades of experiencing these imagined communities from a multiplicity of positions, both personal and professional. Viewed in retrospect, my fieldwork has encompassed and attempted to integrate shifting insights from field sites unified mostly by my interest in them. Perhaps paradoxically, I conclude that there is no such thing as a pure, "traditional" First Nation, and that "Canadian" identity is far more complex than the "French-English fact" which exhausts the complexity of Canada for most external observers.

During twenty-one years at the University of Alberta, I moved betwixt and between: the university and northern Alberta Cree communities; multicultural policies for retention and maintenance of both ethnic and First Nations languages; prairie pride in breaking the land and broad local indictment of central Canadian natural resource exploitation; Ukrainian resentment of French as an official language on Alberta cereal boxes and Quebec's protective language legislation aimed initially more toward incorporation of immigrants than toward exclusion of Anglophones; anti-Americanism and perceived helplessness of Canadians faced by overwhelming disparities of power and autonomy; Indians who had kinsfolk, spiritual teachers and political allies across a United States border which they deemed irrelevant to their histories and emerging solidarities; the power of the provinces and the dependency of the Northwest Territories on southern Canada; the non-urbanness of Edmonton—a city where nearly every household owned a pick-up truck, almost no one had been born in the city, and people went home to rural communities and reserves for weekends and holidays—a city whose populace appeared to be in perpetual motion precisely because everyone had a home place somewhere else. In northern Alberta, urbanization is a reversible process; the Plains Cree have not entirely lost the habits of nomadic subsistence and cyclical resource exploitation. Some of this mobility appears to have rubbed off on immigrants who came to share the marginal farmland and bush.

More dimensions of contrast emerged when I moved to London, Ontario, in 1990: central Canada vs. the west (centre vs. periphery); Ontario vs. Quebec as founding nations and as industrial heartland against the regions; the monolingualism of Anglophone British Empire Loyalist southwestern Ontario vs. that of Francophone Quebec; within the region, London's subordination to Toronto; London vs. the other London from which (some of) the founders came; the utter invisibility of 10,000 Native people in a population of 320,000; the pervasive class distinction East-of-Adelaide (Street) in London; Algonquian former hunters and gatherers, mostly Ojibwe, vs. agricultural Iroquoians, mostly Mohawks.

Cross-Cultural Miscommunication: The Case of the First Nations

The small relatively isolated face-to-face communities of northern Alberta (with their tendrils in urban areas and their seasonal labour migration patterns) are not different in kind from the experiences of other communities within the self-declared Canadian mosaic. The Indians I

know do not wear feather headdresses and braids on Jasper Avenue in Edmonton, except during the annual Klondike Days. To be sure, they are distinguishable from mainstream Canadians, but the differences are not necessarily on the surface, visible as difference. Indeed, Aboriginal culture, history and means of constructing common-sense interpretations of everyday life consistently produce cross-cultural misunderstandings, precisely because they seem familiar.

Anthropology at its best removes the exotic, thereby revealing the human core intelligible across boundaries of culture, class, gender and nation. But first we have to expect the difference beneath the surface. Some Canadian anthropologists, however, particularly those who work overseas, dismiss the anthropological interest of Canadian complexity, assuming that the First Nations have no culture left, presumably because they are no longer exotic, and that the irritating habit of intervening in research priorities and interpretations make it impossible to do serious scientific work.[2] I am of the contrasting view, that traditional cultures persist through constant adaptation carried out through the agency of contemporary Aboriginal persons who are quite capable of speaking for themselves (e.g., in quite different genres and styles: Ahenakew and Wolfart, 1992; Asch [ed.], 1997, especially papers by Sharon Venne and Emma LaRoque; Cruikshank, 1990; Mercredi and Turpel, 1993). Both ethics and epistemology fall into place with the extension of what Johannes Fabian (1983) calls "coevalness" to those with whom anthropologists work. The interface between anthropology and the First Nations leads the discipline, I believe, in delineating a co-constructed space in which such accommodation is ideally reciprocal. In Canada, a critical mass of First Nations languages and cultures maintains them with a saliency in the national forum unparalleled in the United States (where Native peoples are less evenly distributed across the nation and subordinated in public awareness to Afro-American and Hispanic communities).

Because there is nothing unique about isolated communities, the formerly "primitive" of the most unsophisticated stereotype of anthropology, communities need not be equated with cultures. In the real world, cultures interpenetrate and individuals habitually cross their boundaries, often without fuss. I do not want to separate "Canada" from "Native." I am equally a fieldworking anthropologist when I study the Plains Cree of northern Alberta and Saskatchewan, Mohawk and Ojibwe in southwestern Ontario, Slavey in the Northwest Territories, Doukhobors in southern British Columbia, West Africans, Ukrainians in Edmonton, internal and external perceptions of Francophone Quebec or Canada as a nation. The latter, however, most clearly invites reconceptualization of the traditional anthropological concept of culture in terms of a multiplicity of standpoints.

The anthropological method of participant-observation fieldwork works in any community, whether constituted by city neighbourhood, voluntary association, or relatively isolated cultural community. There is a network of known persons whose interaction constitutes a local manifestation of "the culture," exoticism removed. Understanding how things work at this micro-level, through social action, discourse and ongoing, emergent exegesis, seems to me to provide the validity test, the verisimilitude, for sociological interpretations on a more ambitious scale. The properties of larger imagined communities are hypothesized precisely on the basis of such known communities. Anthropology is unique among the social science disciplines in its willingness to interrogate macro-models in light of particular community experiences and the narratives constructed around them. From the standpoint of such local experiences, the global may be brought into focus without losing the complex interplay of everyday life. In the process, of course, we draw on the insights of all of the social sciences, but within our own disciplinary commitment to the historically particular.

The Royal Commission as an Institution of Canadian Reflexivity

Modelling Canadian society anthropologically involves, in part, an acknowledgment that Canadian society envisions itself in ways that are highly accessible to anthropological analysis. A close reading of institutions of Canadian introspection and their potential impact on the society's reflexive capabilities provides a link between the centrifugal forces of diverse cultural communities within Canada and the public culture context within which all interactions occur, between ethnography and the symbolic discourse mediating diversity of standpoints.

The Royal Commission is a Canadian political institution inherited from the mother country and creatively refashioned to accommodate the ambivalence and shift in standpoint that I have been characterizing. Royal Commissioners are appointed to represent all sides of political issues with the potential to become hot potatoes. Co-chairs often come from French and English Canada. The Commissioners are not politicians, although they consult "the public." Their reports foreshadow legislation forthcoming, though rarely immediately and never as a package. Reports are theoretical and idealistic. Many academics

serve on Royal Commissions. Royal Commissions provide politicians with space to avoid confrontation and conflict. Extremists on both right and left are wont to mutter about the "anesthetic" quality of the always numerous and broad-ranging recommendations.

I arrived in Edmonton about the time the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism was issuing its five-volume report. The impact from the prairies was that the Commission revised its own mandate and refused to consider the French/English "official languages" question in isolation from the so-called "other" languages of immigrants—another structural opposition to keep things in balance. The First Nations rested awkwardly in this mix, in the absence of homeland elsewhere and because of their administrative divide from other linguistic and cultural groups in Canada. Native issues fell under Indian Affairs and Northern Development, an uneasy mix with policy priority to the latter.

In a peculiarly Canadian twist, Canada ended with a policy of *bi*lingualism and *multi*culturalism. A minority report by University of Manitoba Slavicist J.B. Rudnyckyj proposed that contiguous linguistic minorities speaking languages still used in multiple functions should have local official language status. Although political feasibility was never in question, the abstract commitment to pluralism was remarkable. Rudnyckyj's examples included Cree and Blackfoot as well as German and his native Ukrainian, all on the prairies where long-term immigrant language diversity was concentrated. In that context, my own response was to document and celebrate the diversity (Darnell [ed.], 1971; 1973; 1977) and argue for a policy of national pluralism encompassing charter, immigrant and Aboriginal languages. I gradually came to realize, however, that this utopian construction was produced by Anglophone elites, mostly in central Canada, and shared by neither immigrants nor First Nations peoples—who had enough to worry about defending their own standpoints toward Canadian-ness and the Canadian nation-state.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples

In this context, the report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Erasmus et al., 1996: v. 5) embodies the politics of ambivalence, shifting identities and elusive borders. First Nations politics proves inseparable from the larger Canadian national process. The Commission, which received a broad mandate in 1991, repeatedly exceeded its time limits and budgets for research and public consultation. The recommendations were dramatic and expensive. Despite Commission efforts to set time lines for implementation, most Canadians and all politicians found the recommendations too unrealistic even to inspire backlash.

To say that the Commission was pro-Native would be an understatement. Its four Aboriginal and three non-Aboriginal members included co-chair George Erasmus, formerly Grand Chief of the national Assembly of First Nations. The Commissioners aspired "to reestablish the association of equals that once characterized the relationship between Indigenous peoples and newcomers in North America" (1996: 296). The implicit oblivion to questions of power and scale cannot help but strike the anthropological reader, regardless of political suasion. This, however, is not the issue. The hyperbole is strategic, directed toward the need for social justice and the uniqueness of claims to it based on Aboriginality.

The Commission distinguished "peoples" as "collectivities of unique character" with "a right to governmental autonomy" from "nations" as "political entities through which Aboriginal people can express their distinctive identity within the context of their Canadian citizenship" (1996: 1). All descendants of the First Peoples had rights, whether or not they were currently constituted within "nations." Because of historical circumstances, a "rebalancing of power" was necessary before "Aboriginal nations" could assume governmental powers within Canadian federation (1996: 2). Many bands were too small for effective self-governance, with only Nunavut well-advanced toward political reform. Recommendations were "based on the nation as the basic political unit of Aboriginal peoples" (1996: 5). Reconstituted nations would "recapture the broad sense of solidarity" that preceded reservations, relocations and residential school assimilation. The process was likened to provinces joining Confederation, a precedent established at a different level of political structure (and capable of extension to the First Nations in interests of equity and natural justice). Federal equalization payments to the provinces offered further models for Aboriginal self-government.

The Commission argued that the social costs of continued marginalization and poverty were borne collectively by all Canadians. Appropriating the rhetoric of urgency from the deficit reduction advocates, the Commission proposed that the costs were escalating out of control and recommended massive cash infusions over a period of years. Although some costs would continue indefinitely, most were temporary measures designed to create change. Dramatic differences in the quality of individual and community lives would appear in less than 10 years and the financial crossover point to actual savings would come in 15-20 years. Long-term economic support

would be needed for "traditional and mixed economies" and for "Aboriginal cultural institutions" (1996: 74). The Commission emphasized that mainstream cultural institutions required similar subsidy—also for reasons of scale.

The Commission's most radical suggestion, however, was that First Nations membership be defined not on racial grounds but as "organic cultural and political entities." "Although contemporary Aboriginal groups stem historically from the original peoples of North America, they often have mixed pedigrees and include individuals of varied ancestry" (1996: 154-155). These groups legitimately "evolve over time and change in their internal composition." Membership involves a "collective sense of national identity" resting on "common history, languages, culture, traditions, political consciousness, laws, governmental structures, spirituality, ancestry and homeland" (1996: 154).

The political hot potato is that Aboriginal peoples and nations so defined would not disappear through assimilation, as is cynically assumed under the three-generation return model uneasily underlying the provisions of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act.

The First Nations Alternative to Canadian Binarity

The Commission's proposals rely heavily on recognition of variable standpoints, which I have argued to be peculiarly Canadian: (1) the First Nations differ among themselves and there can be no single model, in contemporary or historic terms; (2) they are internally diverse: the interests of women, elders, youth and Metis are distinguished; and (3) the North is set apart by high costs of local services, isolation and demographic dominance of Aboriginal peoples. Just solutions cannot be the same for all.

Many First Nations values correspond to how Canada would like to imagine itself. Since the failed Charlottetown Accord of 1992, Aboriginal peoples have held a fair amount of cultural capital in Canadian political life. Interaction [learning and teaching], dialogue, balance and sharing (1996: 12) are First Nations values that the Commission suggests are applicable not only to public education about their traditions, but also to Canadian political debate more generally. The Commission enjoins attention to "harmony, consensus, peace, life and growth." The "immediacy" of media coverage "heightens tension" in ways "at odds with the more leisurely pace of life in First Nations communities" (1996: 203). Whether or not these values characterize other communities within Canada or elsewhere, perception of them as

Aboriginal increases the capacity of Canadian public discourse to think from the standpoint of the First Nations and to extend the area of overlap between their traditions and those of the mainstream.

The salutary exemplar of the First Nations is particularly powerful in the domain of ecology. "Noble savage mystic identity" with the otherwise-frightening wilderness produces a certain public enthusiasm for traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). This enthusiasm is more likely to produce sports hunters and clear-cut loggers than attention to the teachings of Aboriginal elders. Nonetheless, it dilutes and balances the intense Canadian commitment to Northern resource development. In many communities, TEK stands beside language as a pillar of renewed traditionalism.

In light of such ongoing reflexive processes, and although the absence of national unity is constantly descried, both within Canada and externally, I suggest that its actual attainment is both impossible and undesirable. Compromise, through shifting standpoints and alliances, renders *dis*unity positively functional. The status of Aboriginal peoples *as Nations* holds a significant key to continued flux in the national imagination.

The issues are more cultural than political or economic, at least in the first instance. Anthropologists, of course, purport to know something about culture. In Quebec as well as in the RCAP definition of nation, culture overrides both race and historical circumstance. Canadians often seem more willing to protect their nascent film industry, literary and theatrical production and journalistic/media autonomies than to protest the unemployment and economic stagnation resulting from the Free Trade Agreement. I have argued that culture has the potential to defy the variables of power and scale which dominate the Canadian political agenda. Again, nostalgia for the face-to-facedness of the imagined community of known persons, characteristic of Canadian First Nations communities, is writ large in the creative vision of the Canadian nation-state. The fortress mentality provides safety at both the public and private levels. Canadian heroism is grounded in the everyday. In Canada, to think small is utopian. The moral dimensions of a personalistic social order wherein no one (individual or community) can be pinned down to a single stable identity lay the groundwork for a persistent political identity of strategically deployed institutionalized ambivalence. Canadian culture, with all its internal appropriations across diverse constituent communities, continues to resist homogenization, while simultaneously colouring its public discourse around an elusive essentialism of national identity.

Canadian culture sometimes seems to have decomposed into a myriad of not-fully-commensurable (op)positions in which a valued middle ground draws non-binary extremes into public discourse. Balancing the Canadian self has entailed application of First Nations strategies of consensus, environmental stewardship, community rights and obligations, respect for the wisdom of age and the autonomy of individuals. Appropriation of these values, albeit without First Nations consent, underscores the urgent need for bridges to reciprocal solutions. Anthropologists, who know how to listen and how to collaborate across cultural and subcultural boundaries, must be active in reconstituting the Canadian national identity crisis in more complex and humane structures of imagination which can be legitimately shared by all parties to nation-ness.

Notes

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2 These things are more often implied than made explicit, usually to students, often in the corridor talk of departments and professional meetings. For reasons of professional civility, I have no wish to identify individuals with this dismissive attitude. Numerous Americanist colleagues, however, have confirmed my sense that such attitudes are lamentably widespread. My point is that Canadian anthropologists need to think differently about the work they do by "bringing the exotic home" (Di Leonardo, 1998).

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