

Rhetoric and the Reluctant Postnationalist

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Canadian identity is somewhat slippery, and that complicates any consideration of how national identity affects my work in rhetoric. In his first *New York Times* interview after assuming office, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau remarked, “There is no core identity, no mainstream in Canada.... There are shared values—openness, respect, compassion, willingness to work hard, to be there for each other, to search for equality and justice. Those qualities are what make us the first postnational state” (Larson). Charles Foran re-states this claim with more qualification in a 2017 *Guardian* article, mentioning that our putatively postnational Canada may in fact be afflicted with a surplus of conflicting national sentiments, given the sometimes precarious position of Quebec within Confederation and the contested political status of the many First Nations who originally occupied the land we now call Canada. It sometimes feels that Canada is not so much a state but a perpetual negotiation, not only of different communities with each other but of the past with the present. Still, Foran quotes with approval Marshall McLuhan’s 1963 remark that “Canada is the only country in the world that knows how to live without an identity.”

Although the thesis that Canada is postnational is always one referendum or *Idle No More* away from being fractured, the sentiment does to a degree capture the sense of national identity that was fostered throughout my childhood. That's because, as a person who grew up in a relatively homogenous working-class neighbourhood in Winnipeg, I was largely sheltered from the cultural and racial vicissitudes of Canadian history—even those associated with my own background. At the turn of the twentieth century my Mennonite grandparents were lured over from Russia to the wilds of Manitoba with the promise of rich land and religious and cultural autonomy. But it didn't take long after the ground was broken for my mother to be conscripted into the Anglo-Canadian school system, and as a result my cultural inheritance is limited to a borscht recipe rather than Plautdietsch, the Low German that my mother's family spoke, and the religion and values it instantiated.

After decades of traveling and working across Canada, including a two-year stint teaching in an Inuit community on Baffin Island, I now wonder if postnational Canadians are merely, in line with our national proclivity toward politeness, effacing their own identities as an apologetic compensation for effacing the identities of others. That said, postnationality does seem to be an implicit element, not so much of Canadian history itself, but of the public faces Canada has put on for the world since the first World War, and an instinctual sense of a postnational identity persists for me in spite of the critical reservations raised by experience and education. As much as any nationalism is, postnationalism is a myth; to paraphrase Benedict Anderson, it is a way of Canadians imagining themselves (6).

As a rhetorician, though, I cannot hear the word "identity" without thinking of Kenneth Burke, and given the centrality of identity and identification to Burke's conception of rhetoric, I am often led to wonder if Canada, a country purportedly without an identity, is also a country without a rhetoric. Northrop Frye's statement, "the central fact of Canadian history: The refusal of the American revolution" (258) takes on new significance when paired with Burke's dictum that identification and division are always

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facets of the same process (*Rhetoric* 22). In Burkean terms, that Canadian renunciation of division was also a renunciation of identification, and when we forsook the ringing “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” of the Declaration of Independence for the more sedate “peace, order, and good government” of the Constitution Act, we also turned our back on the trappings of revolutionary discourse. This gives Canada a very different rhetorical flavour from the U.S. Earle Birney captures this difference within the Canadian literary context in his infamously caustic poem “Can. Lit”:

since we'd always sky about
when we had eagles they flew out
leaving no shadow bigger than wren's
to trouble even our broodiest hens.

too busy bridging loneliness
to be alone
we hacked in railway ties
what Emily etched in bone

we French & English never lost
our civil war
endure it still
a bloody civil bore

the wounded sired off

no Whitman wanted

it's only by our lack of ghosts

we're haunted

For Emily Dickinson, substitute “Abraham Lincoln” and for Walt Whitman, substitute “Martin Luther King, Jr.,” and a similarly pallid picture of Canadian oratory might appear. This is a misconception, because Canada no more lacks orators than it lacks ghosts. From Agnes Macphail to Tommy Douglas to Ovide Mercredi, we are flush with rhetors, and from residential schools to the Japanese Internment to the *Komagata Maru*, we are thoroughly haunted. But whereas for most Americans the colour of oratory runs red like the blood of sacrificed patriots, for most Canadians it runs white like letterhead. Ask most Canadian university students to quote from a famous speech and they may cough up “Four score and seven years ago” or misquote “Blood, toil, tears and sweat,” but odds are nary a Canadian orator will be mentioned. This even though, unlike the United States, we fought our great battles over national unity with words instead of cannons.

If rhetoric is, as Burke suggests, primarily a process of effecting consubstantiality, built into postnationality is a natural antipathy toward rhetoric, in part because rhetorical action is grounded in shared identity and in part because the use of rhetoric in the cause of postnationality inevitably exposes postnationality itself as an identity. When Justin Trudeau asserts that Canada is postnational, he is boasting of what we are not; if he pushed things a bit further rhetorically, he would have to start dealing with the complexities of what we are, and so political rhetoric in Canada generally runs to the managerial rather than the patriotic.

The postnational wrinkle is that the state doesn't construct its identity in opposition to another national essence, but in opposition to essence itself. Not for Canada is Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, in which the westward journey away from the civilized eastern seaboard burns away the vestiges of European identity and forges a new American identity. The

frontier thesis, like all national myths, is also a rhetorical topos; it mandates and rationalizes the progressive seizure of lands from Native Americans. But for all my questioning about whether “postnational” means post-rhetorical, the clichés that embody Canada’s postnational myth—Joe Clark’s community of communities, the Canadian mosaic versus the American melting pot—are of course themselves rhetorical topos, double-binds that promote cultural identity and at the same time undermine it, re-framing cultural expression in ways that reinforce the overall containing system that is the idea of Canada. At its best, the system enacts a dynamic dance of national identity; at its worst, it evokes Herbert Marcuse’s infinitely absorptive one-dimensional capitalism in which “liberty can be made into a powerful instrument of domination” (7).

While from an internal perspective Canada’s postnational dynamic may be an ongoing reciprocal interaction between cultural communities or founding nations, from an external perspective Canada’s national identity is inevitably defined in relation to that of the United States—not necessarily in reaction to any particular American policy or ideology, but more basically in reaction to the United States as a country that lays claim to an essentialized national identity. And in my experience that dynamic is also manifested in the rhetoric classroom, where the indifference of Canadian students to their own rhetorical traditions is greeted by the enthusiasm of American textbook writers for theirs. Most texts that filter writing theory through classical rhetoric are published in the United States, and to teachers or students reading these texts in a Canadian classroom, it is often striking how strongly the field is filtered through the lens of American civil discourse and ideology. Sometimes that orientation is overt, as when James J. Murphy et al. write in *A Synoptic History of Classical Rhetoric*, “As America is the leader of the free world, it is critical that each one of us understands how our ideas about self-government arose and how they were nurtured through the emergence of principles of public discourse (rhetoric)” (xi), or when Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee begin *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students* with the sentence “When Americans hear the word rhetoric, they tend to think of politicians’ attempts to deceive them” (1).

More subtly, when one looks at the examples these texts use to illustrate various rhetorical principles, the majority of them are either from American sources or relate to American themes. A count reveals that of the 157 example passages used in *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*, only 15% are non-American or non-classical, while in Sonja K. Foss's *Rhetorical Criticism*, only 18% of the 28 sample readings are non-American. Edward P. J. Corbett and Robert Connors's *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* seems more balanced, with 38% of sample passages being non-American or non-classical; it should be noted that many of those, however, are older literary texts rather than modern examples of rhetoric. In contrast, in *Words Like Loaded Pistols: Rhetoric from Aristotle to Obama*, a popular overview of rhetoric written by British writer Sam Leith, 45% of the in-text examples and 38% of the highlighted rhetors are non-American.

Of course, American textbooks are largely written for American students, so it's to be expected that they should appeal to that audience. My point here, though, is that non-American students reading these textbooks will be introduced to rhetoric as a subject that is as much American as it is Greek or Roman. The effects of that framing are manifested not only in the class-to-class consideration of principles or examples, but in the topics that students often propose for assignments that are argument-oriented. A surprising number of Canadian students, left to their own devices, will want to write argumentative essays on capital punishment even though the death penalty was abolished in Canada in 1976; on gun control even though Canada doesn't have nearly the rate of gun crime that the United States has; on same-sex marriage even though it has been legal in Canada since 2005; and on abortion, many wanting to argue pro-choice positions even though abortion was decriminalized in Canada in 1988.

Students know what the Canadian situation is when it comes to these topics. Their desire to write on them speaks to the popularity of American media sources, the degree to which American issues are dominant in Canadian media, and the number of students who view argument-based assignments as pseudo-transactional tasks that have no concrete relation to the actual

issues of their own lives. But I also suspect that, when students are taught rhetoric predominantly through American resources and examples, rhetoric itself, although it pre-dates the United States by over two millennia and was one of the foundations of western European civilization, tacitly becomes a set of American tools that one applies to American matters.

Therefore, as a Canadian rhetorician, I have adopted the goal to re-internationalize rhetoric as a field for my students, drawing on original rhetorical texts more, historicizing principles and concepts instead of just teaching what they are, and using a broader range of examples to show rhetoric operating in a variety of national contexts.

Further, I often draw on my own research work in comparative and contrastive rhetoric to point out the culturally specific nature of rhetorical practices. When teaching introductory rhetoric courses, I often include sections on African American sermonics and oratory or material on Indigenous rhetorics (the latter especially when discussing the role of narrative in rhetoric). Drawing on research I've done on *Sto:Loh* author Lee Maracle (Dadey, "Dialogue"), on identity formation and rhetoric in Indigenous versus Euro-American cultures (Dadey, "Identity"), and on the depiction of rhetoric in Ethnic-American literatures (Dadey, *Rhetorics Rising*; "Invisible Rhetorics"), I hope to make my students aware not only of how rhetoric functions in different cultures, but of how their own oft-tacit rhetorical practices are also culturally delimited. This takes students one step beyond internationalization of the Western rhetorical tradition and toward a consideration of the ways in which the term *rhetoric* might apply (or fail to apply) in non-Western contexts.

And so, in spite of my reservations about postnationalism, it does seem that my approach to rhetoric as a field is influenced by my national identity. The influence is somewhat paradoxical, though, in that it is the Canadian antipathy to essentialism that largely informs my research and teaching. It strikes me that Joe Clark's framing of Canada as a "community of communities" resonates nicely with Kenneth Burke's characterization of

irony as a “perspective of perspectives” (*Grammar* 512). In Burke’s view, “Irony arises when one tries, by the interaction of terms upon one another, to produce a development which uses all the terms. Hence, from the standpoint of this total form...none of the participating ‘sub-perspectives’ can be treated as either precisely right or precisely wrong. They are all voices, or personalities, or positions, integrally affecting one another” (*Grammar* 512). To me, that seems to be a decent approach to rhetorical studies, and to the communal definition of a national, or postnational, identity.

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