

# Call to Witness: Canada, Identity, and the Canadian Rhetorician

JOHN MOFFATT

I distrust nationalism as a motivation for scholarship and reject seeing my work as trying to prove or disprove the “Canadian-ness” of an artefact or experience. Instead, I believe in a Canada of resistance marked by the dissonance between the more-or-less official narratives and the evidence of life as lived. I grew up in a post-centenary Canada where insistent discourses of cultural nationalism, especially in the arts, and particularly in literature, were tempered by equally national discourses of official bilingualism and multiculturalism. On the face of things, these discourses meant that I spoke fluent French by the time I finished high school, and had a working knowledge of a couple of my ancestral languages. It prompted friendly feelings toward the cultures of non-English or French-speaking friends and neighbours in the communities where I lived and worked. It allowed me to feel comfortable in later life to hear Prime Minister Justin Trudeau refer to my country as the world’s first truly post-national state (Foran).

At the same time, there was something of the funhouse mirror about the politely bilingual and multicultural Canada into which my education and politics inscribed me, compared to the real country, in which Anglophones

and Francophones gripe about bilingualism, where enthusiasm for multiculturalism tends to fail at the moment when recognition of the collective rights of cultural communities requires the allocation of resources, and where the efforts of Indigenous communities to have the reality of their experience acknowledged are often dismissed in popular discourse as an unhealthy preoccupation with “past history.”

This Canada was created by the crushing of the Northwest Resistance of 1885, by the 160-year history of the Residential Schools, by the Manitoba Schools Act of 1890 and other measures aimed at suppressing the French language, by the exclusionary Chinese Immigration Act of 1923, by the internment of Ukrainian Canadians during the First World War and of Japanese Canadians in the Second, and by the Highway of Tears. These events can be argued to be more powerful movers of contemporary Canadian life than the War of 1812, the driving of the Last Spike, the victory at Vimy Ridge, or the Triumph of Universal Healthcare.

It's not that the latter events aren't important. Rather, each one, if articulated as part of some national epideictic act in the traditional sense, requires submission to a meaning that has never been established or negotiated by the actual stakeholders as a collective. Conventional patriotic ideology assumes a consubstantiality of positive motive between past events and present stated values. Questioning that consubstantiality, or, alternatively, positing a consubstantiality between past history and present problems, is usually perceived as an attack on Canadian values and identity.

My experience living across the country tells me that Canadian identity exists, but most of its official articulations impose a kind of false coherence alien to the country's actual nature. The late Canadian journalist and popular historian Bruce Hutchison once referred to Canada as an “unfinished country” in his 1985 book of the same title; Canada was a country that had not yet grown into what it could be, or, to look at it in rhetorical terms, had not realized its entelechial potential. Conservatives tend to respond to this call to “grow up” by dismissing what they perceive to be liberal ideology as adolescent rebellion; this “revisionism” is what the country needs to

grow out of. The Harper government's appetite for colonial military history asserted that Canada had been "finished" once upon a time, a "peaceable kingdom" at ease with its British colonial past, but all that had been spoiled by "progressive" efforts to improve it since the 1960s. It would be perfect again, Conservatives promised, if we could just all just recognize the wisdom underlying the good life of the 1950s, when everything (and everyone) was in its place, and Canadians were all too polite to talk about past embarrassments.

The myth of a country that had once been perfect informs many of the nativist discourses around the world that have grown shrill in recent decades, with Brexit and the 2016 US elections being cases in point. These kinds of nationalists share a common view that true patriots only remember history that flatters the nation. For example, I recall a student I taught some years ago growing incensed about one of the familiar "Heritage Minutes" on television, which dealt with callous attitudes towards the deaths of Chinese labourers during the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway (Historica Canada). This artefact, the student declared, was "propaganda" by what was then a Liberal government. He wouldn't go so far as to say that the events like the one described didn't happen, but he felt it wrong that the government would encourage the public to remember them. Doing so, he claimed, was somehow an attack on the values of "mainstream" Canadians and their right to believe that the darker shadows lurking in the National Dream are, to use an increasingly common phrase, "not who we are"; by implication, past acts of discrimination or brutality are not the mainstream's problem, and should be quarantined.

Like contrived acts of remembering, willful acts of forgetting reveal a great deal, most of it unflattering, about "the kind of people we are." Healthy acts of public memory, on the other hand, should deploy unflattering information as inoculative reminders of actual problems that, although they may seem to have gone away, remain unresolved. As such, they retain all their entelechial potential for harm. Kenneth Burke's rhetorical theories and cultural criticism helped me explore how people shape and are shaped by

both the stories they tell, and by the ones that they don't tell. When I encountered Burke's concept of "the forensic" in *Attitudes Toward History* (254-6), it helped me articulate something I had long perceived in Canadian culture as a conflicted discursive space, that is, as a text defined as a "site of struggle" as Barry Brummett puts it (79-80). Burke's account of the forensic as "scientific-causal relationships evolved by complex and sophisticated commerce (of both the material and spiritual sorts)" (254), and which is indexical to maturity of attitude, has been invaluable to me. In particular, it helped me see my work as embracing Hutchison's "unfinished country" not as a failure, but as a creative space in which discourses of identity might emerge, discourses that would be genuinely "realistic" in Burke's sense of the word, as oriented to the realization of implicit attitudes (*A Rhetoric of Motives* 42-3).

Taken in connection with an understanding of identity discourse as "secular prayer," Burke's "coaching of an attitude" in an audience (322), the forensic, with its emphasis on critical thought as an essentially comic act, helped me address perceptions that criticizing traditional patriotic narratives, and responding constructively to others' criticism, was a denial of identity. Superficial rhetorics of "national unity" in Canada, even when they ostensibly embrace diversity, express horror at conflict, since Canada's rich tradition of regional, linguistic, ethnic, religious and political conflict is just as frightening for polite bilinguals, multiculturalists, and internationalists as it is for nativist bigots. For the latter, meaningful engagement with a history of conflict undermines a narrow sense of identity by validating alternative narratives; for the former, talking openly about how conflict has informed the experience of diversity undermines the ethos of inclusion.

Burke would likely see these perspectives as naïve heroic and pre-forensic (255-6), in that they resist, or at least fail to embrace, conflict as essential to meaning-making as a comic process. Both points of view insist on adherence to pre-fab identities of varying vintage. Criticism, if taken to heart, induces cynicism; if not taken to heart, it is perceived as cynical, as seeking to debunk the myth of identity by destroying cherished illusions,

pointing out that, for example, Canada, in cultural terms, is only bilingual on paper; that Canada is perhaps only superficially multicultural and is actually racist; that Eastern and Western Canadians don't understand each other, and that neither seem to know or care much about the North; that Canada is not "the just society" that Pierre Trudeau promised, nor is it either the honest broker and peacemaker, or the partisan "warrior nation" (cf. McKay and Swift *passim*.) that competing voices have claimed it to be.

My sense of identity as a source of critical perspective has always been needled by this "debunking" voice. Such is likely the case for most Canadians who actively ponder these things, and who are goaded by the fear that we may have not a collective Canadian identity, but rather an incoherent collection of identities in Canada. However, Burke's forensic came to my rescue here as well. Burke associates the "debunker" stage, or rather attitude (Burke 92, 256), with an immature response to reality as a conflicted, negotiated thing, and thus as a barrier to criticism as a comic corrective (cf. 166ff). When he argues that the mature critical perspective "negates the negation" (256), and sees the critical act in terms of its comic potential, Burke offers a "comic frame" for critical and social thought which corresponds to my belief that the act of remembering the most bitter aspects of history is a constructive rhetorical act in which we have a chance to learn who we really are, based on what our interactions tell us about how we behave, and how our reaction to those behaviours may prove entelechial to more constructive national conversations on shared values and identity.

The work I have done so far has sought to confirm my belief that an authentic Canadian rhetoric of identity will always be a rhetoric of witness. It will not be about pledging allegiance to a set of statements, and its epideictic manifestations will not lend themselves easily to costumed pageantry. Instead, such a rhetoric, and the kind of inquiry and analysis necessary to document it, will centre on how credible voices may come to be heard in Canada, on what we collectively consider to be credibility or ethos in a witness, and on how that translates into identification and

acceptance by an audience. I'm particularly interested in the construction of ethos in controversial advocate figures in Canadian popular culture, from Grey Owl to Norman Bethune to Farley Mowat.

So far, I've explored this rhetoric of witness in a range of contexts. Some early and as yet unpublished work examined the popularization of complicated histories in television docudrama such as the CBC's *Canada: A People's History/ Le Canada: une histoire populaire* in comparison with similar projects in other countries (Moffatt 2008). As the idea of an ethos of witness took shape, I began to look at specific people and moments and the ways in which governments in particular sought to "sell" them to the public, and how the public and the media responded to efforts to resituate certain determinedly colonial historical events as cornerstones of modern Canada. Finding that the resistance to these efforts tended to articulate a lack of fit between the events as presented, and modern Canada as lived, between icons of Canadian History and the complexity of Canadian life, I began to look at these questions of memory along two lines. On one hand, there is a need to analyse the transactional rhetoric by which identity-based narratives of Canadian history are negotiated in the media between political and academic authorities and the public. My work on the 1812 commemorations (2016, 2012) and on the PMO's enthusiasm for the Franklin discoveries of 2014 (2015) focussed on the assertion of a conservative, colonial narrative on the part of the Harper government, and the subsequent resistance to it in the media. Another paper, on the rhetoric surrounding the same government's decision to fund extensive restorations to the childhood home of Canadian communist icon Dr. Norman Bethune (2013), examined what Burke calls the "symbolic mergers" (328) whereby, in official communication, Bethune was transformed from dangerous radical to "innovator" and "entrepreneur."

These kinds of "symbolic mergers" became an important tool as my project evolved in response to a growing conviction that it is in the forensic, in the traffic in narratives, that the actual textures of Canadian identity are to be observed, not as a checklist of values or adherence to a cult of symbols, but as a consistent argument with history. My recent work on

the early rhetoric of multiculturalism in Canada, especially in the context of discrimination against Asian Canadians on the West Coast, has revealed conflicts in the discourse of ardent supporters of those communities. These conflicts pointed to longstanding ideological barriers that remain undismantled in the discourses of diversity as an authentic characteristic of modern Canada.

The 2015 release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report into the tragedy of the residential schools system is perhaps the most significant rhetorical event in modern Canadian history, in its potential to challenge conventional narratives of the ethos of Canada as a nation-state. The national conversation's capacity to engage with a convincing case that the "peaceable kingdom" accepted cultural genocide and the systematic mistreatment of Indigenous children as the price of development and prosperity will, or ought to be, a major focus for students of the rhetoric of identity in Canada. From the perspective of a rhetoric of witness, I will be very interested in examining what the discourse over the acceptance of the Commission's findings and recommendations will reveal about how credibility is constructed, and challenged, in the effort to establish a new, working narrative of Canadian society.

In the end, I'm motivated by the belief that as long as Canadians keep arguing over the meaning of Canada, Canada will exist as a dynamic, authentic, and relevant cultural space. As an academic, an educator, and a practitioner of rhetorical analysis, I hope I can contribute to the argument by using what I have learned to keep looking for the comic potential in the critical business of being Canadian.

### **Works Cited**

Brummett, Barry. *Rhetoric in Popular Culture*. 4th ed., SAGE, 2014.

Burke, Kenneth. *Attitudes Toward History*. 3rd ed., U of California P, 1984.

- . *A Rhetoric of Motives*. U of California P, 1969.
- Foran, Charles. "Is this the World's First Post-National Country?" *The Guardian*. 4 Jan 2017. [www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/04/the-canada-experiment-is-this-the-worlds-first-postnational-country](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/04/the-canada-experiment-is-this-the-worlds-first-postnational-country). Accessed Feb 10, 2017.
- Historica Canada. *Heritage Minutes: Nitro*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EE3ISzalVuo>. Accessed Aug 9, 2017.
- Hutchison, Bruce. *The Unfinished Country: To Canada with Love and Some Misgivings*. Douglas and McIntyre, 1985.
- McKay, Ian, and Jamie Swift. *Warrior Nation: Rebranding Canada in an Age of Anxiety*. Between the Lines, 2012.
- Moffatt, John. "Policing History: Burke's Constabulary and Forensic Functions of Rhetoric and the Controversy over the War of 1812 Commemoration." *Rhetor*, vol. 6, 2016, pp. 18-35.
- . "A Question of Displacement: Reading the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation's Wartime Defense of Asian Canadians." CSSR/SCÉR 2016 Conference, Canadian Society for the Study of Rhetoric, June 2016, University of Calgary. Conference presentation.
- . "Citizenship for Sir John Franklin: The Erebus Discovery as Burkean Forensic in Canadian Popular Media." CSSR/SCÉR 2015 Conference, Canadian Society for the Study of Rhetoric, June 2015, University of Ottawa. Conference presentation.
- . "Without Borders: The Rhetoric of Remembering Norman Bethune." CSSR/SCÉR 2015 Conference/ Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, Canadian Society for the Study of Rhetoric, June 2013, University of Victoria. Conference presentation.



—. “Tell Us a War Story: The War of 1812 and the Struggle over Public History in Canada.” 12th Biennial Conference of the Rhetoric Society of America, Rhetoric Society of America, 26 May 2012, Loews Hotel, Philadelphia, PA. Conference presentation.

—. “Individual Destinies, Collective Experiences: Historical Docudrama and Canadian–American Difference.” CSSR/SCÉR 2008 Conference, Canadian Society for the Study of Rhetoric, June 2008. Conference presentation.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. *Canada’s Residential Schools: Reconciliation: Volume 6: The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. McGill–Queen’s UP, 2015.