

Can Lit tm: National Branding and Canadian Literary Identity in David McGimpsey's Poetics

by Courtney Richardson

Criticism to date has noted the centrality that consumer culture plays in David McGimpsey's poetics, with each of his critics figuring this recurrent theme as the unifying element in his deployment of various forms of a dual perspective. In his reading of McGimpsey's debut collection *Lardcake* (1996), Jason Camlot observes that consumer culture bridges the gap between references to both high (academic) and low (pop) culture. He quotes Mark Edmunson to assert this point, "University culture, like American culture writ large, is ever more devoted to consumption and entertainment, to the using up of goods and images" (Camlot, "Couch Poetato). As Camlot points out, McGimpsey's poetic interests are quite neatly coupled in these lines and the tension between academic culture and American pop culture gives rise to the simultaneously ironic and immanent voice that lies at the heart of *Lardcake*. Critic Nick Lolordo echoes Camlot's recognition of consumer culture as a major theme in McGimpsey's poetry, and argues for the expression of a dual perspective which combines the voice of a "contemporary commodity consumer" and "pop-cultural tourist" (311). In essence, he claims that the speaker of McGimpsey's poems exists simultaneously as a participant and observer of commodity culture. This duality originates from the fundamental nature of commodity culture, in that "it exists simultaneously as (symbolically, archeologically) American and (in terms of contemporary economic logic) multinational" (Lolordo 311). In his reading of McGimpsey's third collection, *Hamburger Valley, California* (2001), Lolordo comments that it is appropriate that the symbol of the hamburger lies at the centre of a collection about commodity culture, since the hamburger "respects no national boundaries" (321). Referencing the poem "Squeezing Past" Lolordo reasons that through McGimpsey's equivocation of a long list of local delicacies, and finally death, with the iconic Big Mac, "the true equaliser is revealed to be the commodity form itself" (Lolordo 321). In concluding that, for McGimpsey, "...the 'world'...is simply the Burgerworld," Lolordo asserts the pervasive influence of commodity culture in McGimpsey's poetic perspective

(312). A recent article by Nick Mount is consistent with this claim, stating: "Since the first poem in his first book, McGimpsey has found the common denominator of his poetic imagination in the experiences of consumer society" (82). Like Lolordo, he suggests that, for McGimpsey, the symbol of "our hamburger" is "evidence and metonymy of North American cultural unity" (Mount 83). Mount couches McGimpsey's poetic dual perspective in terms of the universal and particular, more specifically the poetic expression of, "the particular commodity and the universal experience of consumption" (85).

As it has been well established that McGimpsey's poetics express a perspective interested in consumer culture, it is not surprising that brand names, factual and fictional, feature prominently in all of his collections. After all it would be rather odd, if not inaccurate, to ignore the role of branding in the advertisement of goods that drives commodity culture. One compelling example of the role of branding in McGimpsey's poetry is rehearsed in "Brands of Coffee/Literary Terms" from his second collection of poetry, *Dogboy* (1998). The poem consists of a list of exactly what the title suggests. Placing "Folgers" and "Faustian" and "Blue Mountain Blend" and "Black Mountain Poets" in succession has the effect of blurring the distinctions between the cultural meaning and consequent power of these labels (16). The use of the forward slash in the title also suggests that these items share a relationship of negotiable equivalence. Ultimately, the poem asks the reader to confront the lack of difference between the branding of tangible commodities like coffee and various cultural products, especially those that name or "brand" formal literary phenomena. McGimpsey also asks the reader to consider the similarities between advertiser and artist, pointing out the financial realities of marketing a cultural product like literature and alluding to the complicity of academic institutions in promoting the cultural concepts most relevant to them. Another list poem which focuses on branding is "Nice at Any Price," from *Hamburger Valley, California*. Consisting of a disjointed list of products associated with celebrity names such as "Rebecca Romijn's aspartame" and "Wesley Snipes handiwipes," the reader is confronted by another shopping list, as in "Brands of Coffee/Literary Terms," and is asked to ponder who or what is being branded; the celebrity or the product (5)? Furthermore, through the practise of celebrity endorsement, the poem seems to question the extent to which the celebrity becomes a product and conversely, how the product can be seen as gaining celebrity status among other products. Also from *Hamburger Valley, California*, "Museum Sweet" opens with the claim that "The Coca-Cola Museum in Atlanta...is

of no worse order or design / than the Musée des beaux-arts in Montreal” (24). The speaker goes on to take account of the museum gift shop, which is “crammed,”

with Monet agenda planners,
Monet coffee bodums, Monet cup warmers
Cork bottomed Monet coasters,
collapsible Monet umbrellas,
and a special vintage of Monet wine...

(24)

This image is set up by way of comparison to the tasting room at the Coca-Cola Museum, where:

There you can have all of the pop you want.
Taps flowing with every company brand,
even ones from other countries,
lime pickle and blackberry pie.

(25)

The speaker has already established that he views the Musée to be on par with the Coca-Cola museum, so a comparison between the brand logos of exotic foreign sodas and the impressionist labels on the bottles of wine are equated much in the same fashion that the Big Mac and local foods or the names of coffee brands and literary terms were in previously mentioned poems. The speaker of “Museum Sweet” concludes that,

...while some may complain that the Coke Museum
is a rather blatant form of corporate propaganda
I thought it a refreshing look
at a refreshed world.

(26)

These parting words question the validity in assuming that a difference exists between the branding of Monet paintings for the purpose of selling gift shop toggery and the institution of a museum to commemorate, arguably, the most widely known brand name product in the world. It is McGimpsey’s inversion of the expected authority of high culture over commodity culture that generates the poem’s critical power. The final lines of “Museum Sweet,” which refer to a “refreshing look at a refreshed world,” play on Coca-Cola’s slogan but also have interesting connotations with the reception of Monet’s paintings in his early career. Though repro-

ductions of his paintings are now almost inescapable in their popularity, a fact of which we must assume that the Musée gift shop is well aware, his work was originally considered an aberration in the Paris arts community for what some critics saw as a sloppy, primitive effort (Matthews and Platt 524-5). Only now could it be said that we consider his impressionist landscapes a “refreshing,” as opposed to crass, view of the natural world. These closing lines consider the role of time in qualifications that are used to canonize high art, as well as the role of the institution in the display or distribution of that art. Could the Coca-Cola museum and its contents come to be remembered as some form of the Salon Refusée? “Museum Sweet” seems to pose this question.

One critic engaged in considering the role of branding in North American consumer culture is journalist Naomi Klein, author of *No Logo*. Klein introduces her book with an account of the genesis of the branding phenomenon. She argues that with the advancement of factories, new products were being produced at great rates, as were old products in “strikingly new forms” (Klein 6). What followed from this technological advancement was that:

...the market was now being flooded with uniform mass-produced products that were virtually indistinguishable from one and other. Competitive branding became a necessity of the machine age—within a context of manufactured sameness; image-based difference had to be manufactured along with the product. (Klein 6)

There are some interesting parallels between Klein’s discussion of the origin and function of the brand in consumer culture and David McGimpsey’s focus on that culture in his poetry. This is especially the case if Klein’s theory is mapped onto the realm of marketing cultural commodities, particularly poetry and literature. If we understand the factory as representing a means of mass cultural production, which can be further specified as the North American English mass media as well as with Academic institutions, then an argument can be made for the presence of a vast array of cultural commodities and discourses, within which authors would seek to differentiate themselves from their competitors. Consequently, the homogenizing effect of this saturated market gives rise to the branding of cultural commodities in the same fashion as the more explicit branding of factory produced goods. The recurrence of poems that list commodities in McGimpsey’s poetry is one suggestion that he is interested in a poetic discussion of both commodities and cultural branding in the kind of saturated market that Klein describes, but a close reading of McGimpsey’s poetry

and critical essays reveals how his poetics develop the position of the Canadian writer as one who is located in a cultural market that is so saturated with American product that they are forced to brand themselves in a very specific manner. In his essay, "A Walk in Montreal," McGimpsey identifies a mode of branding that he feels certain that English poets living in Quebec have attempted to employ in order to differentiate themselves from other English writers in Canada. He argues that these writers formulate a collective identity or "brand," rooted in a European ethos that differentiates them from other English Canadian writers. Mapping McGimpsey's argument regarding this Anglo-Quebec brand of poet onto the position of the Canadian English writer in general, we may deduce the following: if, as McGimpsey asserts all poets writing in English (including Anglo-Quebec poets) are essentially competing in the same American mass media-dominated market—then it follows that the English Canadian writer is competing in the same context and may also seek to brand himself in order to distinguish his product in an oversaturated American market. There is evidence of such a position being developed in McGimpsey's poetry, wherein the branding strategy that he attributes to some Anglo-Quebec writers in "A Walk in Montreal" may be likewise suggested of any English Canadian writer.

In "A Walk in Montreal," David McGimpsey uses David Solway's theory of "double-exile" as an example against which to develop his own arguments on the practice of national cultural branding. Solway's theory of "double exile" claims that the Anglo-Quebec writer is the victim of a "twin-barrelled neglect" from not only his French compatriots but from the rest of English Canada as well ("A Walk in Montreal" 81). McGimpsey's rebuttal to this claim is that Montreal anglophones are not isolated from the rest of the Canadian English community, let alone the world, due in most part to the bridging impact of the English mass media and also the presence of a comprehensive English education system in the city ("A Walk in Montreal" 137). He makes the point that in this day and age, one need not leave his or her small home town in Northern Alberta, and especially a cosmopolitan city like Montreal, to have travelled all over the world through image, music, television and radio. Furthermore, McGimpsey views the claim that Anglo-Quebec writers are treated differently in Toronto as a "confrontational fiction," claiming that they are in the same position as any other English writer in the country ("A Walk in Montreal" 137). He would know. Having spent the majority of his life in Quebec, the province of his birth, all three of his publishers: Insomniac Press, ECW Press and Coach

House Books are based out of Toronto. He also writes regularly for Air Canada's EnRoute magazine, which reaches an international audience.

Another reason why McGimpsey might disagree with Solway's theory of isolation is evinced in the feedback he receives on the internet. There he is widely reviewed, particularly for *Sitcom*, by people all over the country. It would be a mistake to overlook the pervasive and immediate power of the World Wide Web as a point of opposition to any theory of cultural isolation where the internet is so widely used. However, the most significant point that comes out of his dismissal of the concept of 'double-exile' is McGimpsey's argument that the motivation behind such manoeuvres is simply the business of cultural branding. McGimpsey's thesis states that in a bid to differentiate themselves from other Canadian English writers, certain Anglo-Quebec authors have cultivated a brand of European difference from their Americanized Canadian counterparts. McGimpsey notes that, despite the fact that Toronto bashing is a national pastime, within Montreal arts circles it serves a more strategic purpose. This is the negation of the middle class values of English Canada in an effort to co-opt a position which is superior to the "Western Canadian mall" aesthetic:

In strategically locating Montreal as a fictionalised escape from the hegemonies of Toronto U.S.A., this metaphorical Montreal (even for English writers) must be French—even Frencher than it actually is... Naturally the plateau's urban under-thirty hipness has also become a commodity worth pursuing for new writers understandably eager to assert difference in the Canadian literary marketplace. ("A Walk in Montreal" 135-6)

The "exotic reverence" that east end Montreal inspires in English Canadians is attached to the idea of it as a place where they "can lose touch with the dread conformities of the Americanized suburb... the poetic antidote to the repressive demands of the WASP world" ("A Walk in Montreal" 133). By creating a fictional "personality" through what Klein refers to as "image based difference" (6), these poets hope to market their literary product more effectively in a saturated cultural market. In short, they have created a brand for themselves. By obviating this gesture, which combines both myth making and marketing strategy, McGimpsey further diminishes the difference between the Quebec-Anglo and any other English writer. He says what Montrealers loathe to hear, that their city is much more like Pittsburgh or Toronto than it is like Berlin or Trieste ("A Walk in Montreal" 138). This claim has additional uncomfortable implications, as conceding the lack of difference between the Anglo-Canadian and Quebec-Anglo also requires that one recognise a serious lack of difference between Cana-

dians and our neighbours to the south (136-7). As critics have noted of his poetry, McGimpsey's position in "A Walk in Montreal" suggests that all North Americans, particularly English speakers, are connected by the unifying power of consumer culture. Nick Mount writes of *Hamburger Valley, California*, "McGimpsey's poems suggest the mythic significance of popular culture, but they ground themselves in the real, in unifying cultural experiences instead of unifying (already poetical) national myth" (83). It is ultimately this joined experience of (North) American media that deflates the exaggerated character though which Anglo-Quebec poets seek to brand themselves and similarly, McGimpsey's poetic discussion of the Canadian writer is subject to the same kinds of criticisms. Just as he exposed the marketing motives behind the myth of difference propagated by certain Anglo-Quebec writers, he will time and again prioritize the shared experience of a mass (American) commodity culture in lieu of a Canadian national myth.

Marketing and the arts is not a new pairing. Many artists have wanted to make a profit from their work and as a result have had to seek funding, recognition and modes of distribution from established organizations or, put plainly, people with money and connections. While Klein remarks that there have always been artists who have fought to maintain the integrity of their work, she also insists that, "Cultural products are the all-time favourite playthings of the powerful" (34). Writing today in Canada is no exception. Though some Canadian artists are privately patronised, the context with which McGimpsey's poetry is written is one that is heavily influenced by federal funding, recognition and, promotion. This fact comes with complicating political factors that are explored in McGimpsey's poetry. It seems obvious enough that any patron would not fund work that offended their personal or political sensibilities, so it is also reasonable to suspect that applying for and accepting money from a federal fund of taxpayer's money would require a justification befitting any other federally underwritten endeavour; the improvement of the lives of Canadian citizens, which in this case translates into the development of our very own, very Canadian literary canon. The establishment of a recognizable, coherent canon has more in common with branding than would at first seem obvious. It is of course connected with a national identity, which requires the same sort of generalizations and myth making that branding does.

The formation of a Canadian national identity mirrors the strategic identity formation of the Quebec-Anglo that McGimpsey notes in "A Walk in Montreal." For any number of reasons, a group of people are invested in the creation or strategic grouping and sustainment of a distinct set of traits that are attributed to a particular entity in order to differentiate it from oth-

ers. A gesture of difference follows from the inherent discomfort of being mistaken for an entity similar enough to warrant this concern. This discomfort borne of similarity supports McGimpsey's assertion of the all-encompassing effects of American mass culture noted by his critics and can be seen as a factor which would entice certain Canadian writers to assert a set of traits that set them apart from American competitors. It would follow from this that the Canadian literary canon would define and uphold similar traits, in the very least for organizational purposes, and more broadly, for the augmentation of a distinct and coherent national identity. Such a set of traits attributed to a cultural commodity for the purposes of differentiation and sale could be called a brand, according to Klein's definition. The relationship between a national identity and a cultural brand could be considered mutually beneficial, since a cultural brand can be developed through association with a national identity and in turn, the cultural product which adheres to that brand's definitive conditions serves to strengthen a coherent national identity.

Elaborating on her description of the "beginning of the brand", Naomi Klein notes that early logos were designed to evoke feelings of "familiarity and folksiness" in order to counter the overwhelming anonymity of mass produced packaged goods (6). She cites Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben as examples. This practice eventually gave rise to what she calls "the corporate 'personality', uniquely named, packaged and advertised" (6). This use of familiar imagery in order to posit a stance of superior difference in a larger "host culture" (30) is depicted in McGimpsey's poetry as the "Can Lit" brand. The "host culture" that this formulation functions in is, not surprisingly, American consumer culture, a presence which, "the voice of Canadian identity tells us, seeks to erase difference" (Lolordo 313). The ubiquitous reference to American consumer culture throughout McGimpsey's poetry automatically opposes this notion of Canadian difference, opting instead to travel just as comfortably between pop and literary references as he does between Dallas, Texas and Kingston, Ontario. Mount recognises this as one of the reasons McGimpsey is an "especially uneasy fit" in Canadian poetry circles, offering that it is probably due to a lack of Canadian content in the poet's choice of "Jack Klugmans instead of jack pines, ancient rock stars instead of ancient rocks" (90). Lolordo also remarks upon McGimpsey's refusal to buy into generalised national identities, writing that "he refuses to sing the larger geopolitical entities (Quebec, but equally Canada)—which for him lack force when compared to the transnational, intangible nonentity that characterises postmodern consumer society" (312).

It is not only his fraternisation with “the enemy” that sets McGimpsey apart from other Canadian poets, but also his irreverence for sacred symbols of national identity. In an introduction that McGimpsey penned for an anthology of Canadian literary humour, he clearly describes his understanding of the Canadian brand of literature that is mythologized through difference:

Given Canadian literature’s reputation for high earnestness, for novels that start out with ten-page descriptions of family farms in the London, Ontario region...I would go so far as to say that high earnestness has become the commercial brand of Canadian literature, and while there’s a lot of good product in that line, the main body of Canadian literature generally sees humour as marginal or antithetical to dominant literary strategies which seek to define the Canadian as something obviously important and seriously different than the American. (“Introduction” 6)

Here McGimpsey provides us with what he sees as the two most recognizable traits of the “Can Lit” brand: writing that is *not* humorous and that is *not* American. So it is through his use of humour and reference to American consumer culture that he poses a challenge to the motives behind this earnest all-Canadian brand. The use of humour in his poetry is consistent with McGimpsey’s constant references to popular culture, in that humour “avails itself to the people and often overrides other discourses with one simple but ruthless standard: *if people laugh, it is funny*” (6). This is not unlike the ruthless economic standards that drive the production of pop culture: *if it sells, (or is popular) it is good*. A comical tone figures prominently in McGimpsey’s work, not only for a laugh, but as an expository tool in deciphering his surroundings. For McGimpsey, the joke functions to expose commercial motives at the core of seemingly noble ideologies that profess to promote an accurate national cultural identity; “Jokes consistently subvert seemingly good intentions by revealing a less noble nature in a shared failed humanity” (McGimpsey, “Introduction” 6). By poking fun at idealized cultural aspirations of unity, McGimpsey’s humour questions the possibility of these goals, a somewhat bleak perspective. For this reason, McGimpsey’s comedic tone and American pop-poetic content can be interpreted as treacherous in Canadian literary circles. These acts of comic or allusive irreverence in McGimpsey’s poetry are identified by Lolordo as “acts of cultural refusal” since they do not express fear of absorption by a larger entity like the United States (313). To criticize other Canadian writers is to commit treachery because, as Lolordo writes, “preservation of national difference against the monolith to the south takes pri-

ority” (313). For the “Can Lit” brand, the mythologized notion of national identity and the commercial realities of marketing cultural product are deeply interconnected. McGimpsey’s poetry engages a dialogue and critique of this relationship on some level in each of his collections. Through a comedic appeal to their concrete physical origins, McGimpsey often reminds the reader of the physical bodies that have become mythologized as national mascots and the marketing strategies they represent to further both national and commercial agendas.

Like the early marketers who dreamt up Aunt Jemima, McGimpsey makes use of the exaggerated caricatures of various representations of Canadian-ness, including politicians, celebrities, symbols and traits. These puffed up images are easy fodder for his cutting wit, which he employs with heavy reference to American icons of pop culture. Consider this early poem, “O Coconut,” which touches upon stereotypes of Canadian national identity. The title of the poem, which plays on the title of the Canadian national anthem, signals the irreverent tone of the lines to follow. McGimpsey plays on the reader’s presupposed tendency toward stereotyping both Americans and Canadians and rehearses petty acts of identification through difference, ultimately revealing that there is little or no difference or significance in such gestures.

I live in that part of Canada
where people eat a quart of bologna everyday
and call each other names like ‘Debbie’ or ‘Bill’
but they don’t really mean it.

(*Lardcake* 96)

By stating the setting as “that part of Canada” and referring to stereotypical symbols of the American middle class such as bologna and the names Debbie and Bill, McGimpsey diminishes the difference between the two nationalities, and levels criticism at those who would propagate a myth of Canadian superiority in the line, “but they don’t really mean it.” Equally ironic is the next stanza, in which Canadian literary celebrity *par excellence*, Margaret Atwood competes for attention with the quality of lap dances our country has to offer:

The lap dances are just fine
so it’s the weather that gets you down.
Once the snow was so deep
you couldn’t hear Margaret Atwood.

(96)

Making reference to desires that are typically or outwardly spurned by the upper class works to cut through stereotypes in two ways. Initially the American couple is associated with consuming large quantities of bologna, which can be seen as playing up negative stereotypes of middle class Americans. Once this statement is revealed as an exaggerated stereotypical view, the base physical reality of the lap dance being as much a part of Canadian culture as Margaret Atwood deflates Canadian self-aggrandisement while it liberates middle class Americans. The poem grants both Canadian and American, upper class and lower, equal standing. Where in many of the *Lardcake* poems, McGimpsey "convinces us of the materiality of popular legend and media fluff by bringing it under a knife" (Camlot, "Couch Poetato"), here we are reminded of the physical reality of Atwood's body and the superficial connection between it and her mythic celebrity when she is silenced by the natural force of the elements. McGimpsey sets up the myth of Canadian manners by saying, "its all true", only to cut it down immediately by noting that the video clerk always takes the time to add, "'thank you pervert'" (96). Just as he "succeeds in corporalizing the immaterial cliché of sit-com personality" in early poems like "All the *thirtysomething* Characters Die" and "In Memoriam: A.H. Jr." (Camlot, "Couch Poetato"), in "O Coconut," Canadian self-flattery is cut down and erased by an appeal to the base physical realities of being human, regardless of nationality.

In *Dogboy*, the poem "Sing Along Jubilee" offers a larger cast of famous Canadians to spoof. Set in what might be considered by some as the golden era of Canadian folk music, McGimpsey adopts the position of an audience member in attendance at the Sing Along Jubilee, a show hosted by Don Messer from 1959-69, which was produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. With characteristic irreverence directed here at Canadian music legends such as Anne Murray, Gordon Lightfoot and Stan Rogers, McGimpsey writes, "but we didn't sing along, no matter how much they said we did" (24). Implicit in this line is a collective desire to create a cultural sense of community, even if what is being produced isn't enjoyed by the audience. In the lines, "Tommy Hunter kisses Brian Adams / and all is right with the world" (24), McGimpsey employs anachronism to deflate this forced nostalgia by reference to pop culture. The humorous physical union of two bodies which connote very different kinds of Canadian celebrity status has the effect of grounding these mythic personae while drawing attention to the value we grant them. The image of these two singers kissing is emblematic of McGimpsey's holistic view of Canadian media, and typical of his poetry's refusal to distinguish between artistic and

political relevance, “high” or “low” culture. Ultimately, McGimpsey suggests that the notion of national identification through art may be unlikely, if not impossible; “When you think a Stan Rogers song / actually expresses your personal experiences / it is time to leave Nova Scotia” (*Lardcake* 25).

From the same collection, “Handy Hints for your Press Kit” reads like a play book for those who wish to properly brand themselves as Canadian artists. By creating a hilarious portrait of exactly what one *shouldn’t* do to market oneself under the Can Lit brand, with advice like, “You can’t say ‘testicle’ on television” and, “You shouldn’t refer to David Gilmour as ‘punkin’” (McGimpsey, *Lardcake* 59). McGimpsey also suggests that being successful in Canada requires one to cozy up to federal grant associations. In doing so, one must refrain from admitting to lewd fantasies involving Olympic athlete Silken Laumann in their grant applications, because this kind of “Canadian content will not get you up to the podium / so you can blow kisses to Keith Spicer” (59). Referencing Spicer, who was chairman of the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission from 1989 to 1996, McGimpsey further suggests the crucial relationship between the government and the success of Canadian artists (59).

Jason Camlot describes the long narrative poem, “Ou est Queen Street” from *Hamburger Valley, California* as “a *Bildung* story that leads [its protagonist] through the (natively Can-Lit) backwoods” to a humorous post-Quebec-quagmire pastoral fantasy of Toronto as L.A., that can be read as the poet’s early recognition of the role of nationalism in the arts (Camlot, “Introduction” 28). The beginning of the poem finds the narrator as a high school student, already showing irreverence for Canadian nationalist dogma, having been sent to detention for acting out during a “macaroni salute to Canadian National Unity,” which spells out a fuzzy federalist unity plea to Quebec: “*Quebec on vous aime / Ensemble nous restons fort*” (McGimpsey, *Hamburger Valley California* 15). This humorous image of a “macaroni salute” draws attention to discursive distance between the frivolity of arts and crafts and the establishment of national identity in the poem’s setting, but also alludes to the potentially arbitrary connection between more established acts of artistic expression and nationalism that McGimpsey touched on at the end of “Sing Along Jubilee” (*Dogboy* 25).

In McGimpsey’s latest collection, *Sitcom*, he continues to develop a critical position on the Can Lit brand. He does this in “Redemption” by investing well known Canadian country singer, Shania Twain with mythical power so farfetched, that we could not possibly take seriously the lines:

Doesn't Shania capture Leviathan
and convince him to play bass in her band?
Doesn't Shania declaw the ghosts of bears
as they galumph through Ghost-Bear land?

(91)

These mock heroic images are interspersed with softer moments of humanity which undermine her status as a lucrative and powerful Canadian symbol. She is described as someone who "doesn't mind if you don't notice how she wears her hair" and then as a vigilant figure "waiting with you at your MRI" (91). Despite the poem's satirical stance on inflated celebrity status, the final lines communicate tenderness and allude to the real power that fictional personae have in the lives of people who worship celebrity:

Imagine, O Sufferers, the great peace
That comes when Shania touches your head,
When she looks at you and says, "Take it easy,
Hoss, lie down without embarrassment."

(91)

The sonnet "CanPo" offers a title which produces a brand name for Canadian poetry, likely a sub category of "Can Lit," which the speaker immediately proceeds to dishonour. Consisting of nonsense parading as high earnestness, McGimpsey makes reference, not to Canada's literary royalty or majestic natural beauty, but to two native Montrealers who have "made it" in Hollywood: William Shatner and Elisha Cuthbert (37). The poem makes manifest another branding phenomenon that Klein describes in *No Logo*. In the case of some powerful brands, "the ostensible product was mere filler for the real production: the brand" (Klein 16). Similarly, the effect of this poem suggests the monotony of content that goes toward developing the CanPo brand, a practise which replaces the established role of the poet in society to produce new and varied ways of viewing our culture with pure marketing strategy. However, as with "Handy Hints for Your Press Kit", the Canadian content of "CanPo" fails to make the Can Lit cut, though it isn't for lack of trying, as McGimpsey writes, "O, something-something loon" (*Sitcom* 37) before reverting back to an American cultural reference to nameless labourers in a sardonic tone:

do you think I could ever forget
the greatest people in the whole country;
The Tampa Bay Buccaneers' grounds crew?

(37)

In “Susan #43”, McGimpsey poeticises his argument from the Introduction to “Career Suicide”, in which the character Susan learns “what it means to be Canadian” (*Sitcom* 50). Aside from recognizing “hockey’s beauty” we learn that one must:

puddle yourself into the dread tropes
of Southern Ontario: stubby ales,
Syl Apps, and sitting on a train ride
with a wispy minister who can predict the dismal lengths of winter
from leeward peeling on paper birches
and take three strokes off your golf game.

(50)

Here McGimpsey pokes fun at the brand of rural high earnestness propagated by Canadian nationalists. An exaggerated caricature of a wispy Canadian minister is deflated when his mystical abilities to predict the weather are placed on par with a golf tip. McGimpsey’s mocking critique of those Canadian poets who fail to produce “CanPo” is reminiscent of his critique of Solway’s theory of “double exile,” when he describes them as:

‘a nation of sorority girl pledges’
always crying for the unringing phone,
humourless poets, inept suicides,
still pretending to know how to speak French.

(50)

By painting this humorous scene, McGimpsey locates himself firmly between two opposing positions: he is not willing to sing the “Can Lit” anthem for his supper, but he is also weary of claiming political isolation.

Perhaps this position is best illustrated in a seemingly self-referential discussion of the “Can Lit” brand in “Rejection,” where McGimpsey takes aim at the kind of Canadian publication that features poetry whose goal is to further the nationalist brand. In an imagined letter of rejection from the fictional magazine, the cringe-inducing titled “*Tearsea*,” McGimpsey criticizes the same kind of forced nationalist nostalgia that he took to task in “Sing Along Jubilee” by noting that the editor much prefers “poems as sturdy as a pioneer” that “happily land in more timeless quarters,” than poetry which references “the faddish ephemera of America” (88). Poetry that includes American pop culture references like McGimpsey’s, “where it’s all *Kelly Clarkson Sings Songs of Hope!* and saving money on bags of Cheetos” clearly goes unrecognised by certain Canadian literary publica-

tions (88). If we read the citation of the kinds of submissions that *Tearsea* publishes—poems “*Freed from maple shade and smoked-eel supper*” (90)—in contrast with the content of “CanPo,” it becomes clear that the only difference between them is how seriously the poet takes himself. It is noteworthy that the tone and title of “Rejection” imply not only that McGimpsey’s poetry is not taken seriously due to its content, but that by extension, this somehow makes him unpatriotic. The editors of *Tearsea* may be looking for “poets who believe in their native beauty” (90), but David McGimpsey’s response to this kind of advice might be found in the final lines of another poem about his hometown, “Montreal.” When it is suggested to the speaker by a sports therapist named Taffy-Jane, that, as a Canadian and a Montrealer, he “should really just try to love / [himself] a little more,” the speaker replies with humor, “God, I hope she meant that in a sexual way” (81).

Implicit in this response is the absurdity of the assumption that if you are critical of your country or of the writing its cultural infrastructure produces then you must be a self-loathing Canadian. The rebuttal of McGimpsey’s poetry to such an assumption is that there are political and commercial forces behind the propagation of a falsely singular and homogeneous idea of what it means to be Canadian and to live in Canada. For McGimpsey, the desire to dismiss the powerful influence of American mass commodity culture on the lives of Canadians is a sign of self-delusion, at best, and disingenuousness at worst. By exposing the branding and marketing strategy which fuels the entwined relationship between Canadian writing and national identity, McGimpsey demonstrates the extent to which commercial culture is entrenched in even the most seemingly patriotic of endeavours. McGimpsey’s poetry alerts and invites the reader to look beyond the so-called “Can Lit” brand for a more accurate Canadian perspective, which like it or not, is heavily influenced by American culture. If McGimpsey is not worried about being called a “Bad Anglo” for voicing unpopular opinions regarding Montreal language politics, he is perhaps even less concerned about being known as Canadian poetry’s “Bad Canadian.”

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