Liberated Arts: a journal for undergraduate research

Volume 1 | Issue 1 | Article 5

2015

Overcoming Kenophobia in The Tragically Hip’s “At the Hundredth Meridian”

Brent Holmes
Huron University College, bholme3@uwo.ca

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/lajur

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons, and the Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/lajur/vol1/iss1/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Huron University College at Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Liberated Arts: a journal for undergraduate research by an authorized editor of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact tadam@uwo.ca, wlswadmin@uwo.ca.
Overcoming Kenophobia in The Tragically Hip’s “At the Hundredth Meridian”
Brent Holmes, Huron University College alumnus and Deputy Editor for The Gazette (2014–2015)

Abstract: This essay explores the lyrical work of Gord Downie as part of the iconic Canadian rock band, The Tragically Hip. It uses the work of music journalists, Canadian literary theorist and pop culture theorists to explore what Downie’s lyrics communicate about Canadian identity and how Downie engages with the theme of space, boundaries, and kenophobia in Canadian literature. By applying Margaret Atwood’s and Northrop Frye’s ideas of space and nature in Canadian literature, The Tragically Hip’s song “At the Hundredth Meridian” can be understood as an important work of Canadian music. In “At the Hundredth Meridian,” Downie challenges the concepts of empty spaces versus filled spaces, external and internal space, and accepting oneself as part of Nature’s process. In doing so, Downie articulates a post-survival mentality, finding a way to become what Atwood called “a creative non-victim” (38).

Keywords: Canadian literature; The Tragically Hip; Gord Downie; music; lyrics

“Look out! It’s a black band of evil, spanning the globe,” Tragically Hip frontman Gord Downie cries while introducing the song “At the Hundredth Meridian” during a live show in Texas (Live at the Ruta Maya). The hundredth meridian, this “black band of evil,” is a line of longitude dividing East from West in Canada. Aside from being “where the great plains begin,” it is also “a convenient political dividing line […] between the liberal leaning east and conservative leaning west” (Dame, A Museum After Dark). Gord Downie has often explored the theme of the division of spaces in his music. From Fully Completely’s “At the Hundredth Meridian” and “Pigeon Camera” to “About This Map” from The Tragically Hip’s most recent album, Now For Plan A, the politicization of land plays a key role in Downie’s poetry. “At the Hundredth Meridian” uses the shifting ideas of borders and cultural myths to engage in a discussion about the nature of Canadian identity and concludes, following in Northrop Frye's and Margaret Atwood’s visions of Canadian literature, that to survive in Canada is to occupy a small personal margin against a collection of greater forces.

To understand the ideas of space within “At the Hundredth Meridian,” it is necessary to observe The Tragically Hip’s origins as a band. Downie notes when they started they were considered either a “frat-boy band, too smart for [their] own good” or looked down on as “working class bums” (qtd. in Barclay, Jack, and Schneider 588). As a young band out of Kingston, they were often expected to play covers and were often told to be a cover band of larger, more popular artists such as The Doors or Van Morrison (588). In response The Tragically Hip integrated covers into their own songs. Live versions of “At the Hundredth Meridian” include covers of Fleetwood Mac’s “Dreams” and Peter Frampton’s “Do You Feel Like We Do?” (Live from the Vault, Vol. 3). These covers are important because they challenge the way the band is told to think of themselves in relation to these bigger artists. Live Between Us’s recording of “Grace, Too” has Downie reference Lennon’s “Imagine,” ranting, “I was raised on TV / like so many of
you I see around me / Nothing to live or die for / No religion too.” While this quoting of Lennon gives a kind of cover, it transforms the meaning into what Downie wants it to say – centrally to a reflection on the speaker in “Grace, Too.” In integrating these songs, Downie does not accept the role of being made to occupy a margin dominated by famous artists; rather he accepts both his own work and popular works generally as malleable, able to be transformed by their environment. This gives him the ability to use live performance as a creative space – live versions of “At the Hundredth Meridian” include early versions of “Poets” and unreleased tracks such as “Radio Show” (Live From the Vault, Vol. 6), as well as his popular microphone stand and Tokyo rants (That Night in Toronto; Live From the Vault, Vol 5). The Tragically Hip’s 1997 live album, Live Between Us, includes a range of covers, including David Bowie’s “China Girl” and The Beach Boys’ “Don’t Worry Baby” in the live version of “New Orleans is Sinking,” but the band makes a more interesting statement by rejecting the idea that they have to play popular songs and by integrating Canadian songs and art into the mix. The album’s live version of “Nautical Disaster” opens with a rant that satirizes the 1996 film adaptation of Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient: “They’re turning this song into a movie / Starring Peter O’Toole as the curmudgeonly lighthouse keeper / and Jodie Foster in the role of Susan / It’s called The Nurse Patient.” In the same song Downie covers The Rheostatics “Bad Time to be Poor” and Jane Siberry’s “The Temple,” all of which references point back to Canadian music and literature and make The Tragically Hip more than just a cover band.

The reason it is so important to understand the environment out of which The Tragically Hip emerged and how it informs their live shows is that it is a quintessentially Canadian formation: a small entity realizing itself as an entity by surviving in the midst of far greater powers and influences. Frye and Atwood provide the best insight into Downie’s lyrics because Downie and The Tragically Hip came to understand themselves during the 1980s and 1990s, a time when Frye and Atwood were significant figures in the Canadian literary landscape. Subsequently, Downie’s lyrics wrestle with the ideas posited by Frye and Atwood in the 1960s and 1970s. In Frye’s conclusion to Carl F. Klinick’s Literary History of Canada (1965), he notes, “Canada has produced no author who is a classic in the sense of possessing a vision greater in kind than that of his best readers. […] There is no Canadian writer of whom we can say what we can say of the world’s major writers, that their readers can grow up inside their work without ever being aware of a circumference” (821). Therefore, to be Canadian is to always be aware of a border whether in art, politics, or geography; to be Canadian is to mildly but inexorably hold that fragile garrison, to survive and resist with it against the forces around and against it. Frye touches on an aspect of Canadian cultural identity that novelist Hugh MacLennan relates in his essay, “Boy Meets Girl in Winnipeg, and Who Cares?” (1960). In MacLennan’s essay, he recalls a meeting with studio executives who wanted to make a film adaptation of his novel, Barometer Rising (1941), a historical fiction about the Halifax explosion. The executives wanted to change the location of the story to America because “who’s ever heard of Halifax down here except as a word nicely brought-up kids say when what really they mean is hell?” (128). MacLennan notes the impossibility of achieving success while telling stories that only resonate with Canadians, since the Canadian population is smaller than that of the United States and “at least a third of [that population] is not presumed to read English literature in its spare time” (127). That The Tragically Hip’s popularity exists almost exclusively in Canada or among Canadian ex-patriates (Barclay 607) is part of a larger tradition in Canadian literature. Frye notes that Canada is isolated between the greater powers of America or Great Britain (826), and its writers have become focused
on the idea that feeling Canadian means “to feel part of a no-man’s-land with huge rivers, lakes, and islands that very few Canadians had ever seen” (826). As Michael Barclay, Ian A.D. Jack, and Jason Schneider observe in *Have Not Been The Same: The Can Rock Renaissance* (2001), The Tragically Hip emerged at a time when Canadian culture and music was largely engrossed by American popular culture (588), but a large part of what endears the band to its Canadian audience is the discussion of themes specifically related to Canadian identity and of “a ‘Canadian sound’ suddenly taking shape” (582). They note that what made the band popular among Canadians was that the songs evoke “a familiar surrounding that shaped their own personality, be it a small prairie town or their local outdoor hockey rink on a frigid Saturday morning” (582). The Tragically Hip’s popularity is not based on sound alone; Downie’s lyrics speak to larger themes in Canadian literature. “At the Hundredth Meridian” wrestles with the question that Frye argues perplexes the Canadian sensibility: “It is less perplexed by the question ‘Who am I?’ than by some such riddle as ‘Where is here?’” (826).

“At the Hundredth Meridian” opens with two questions: “Me debunk an American myth? / And take my life in my hands?” (*Fully Completely*). Live performances have also seen Downie change the opening line to “Me debunk an American myth? / Or Canadian / And take my life in my hands?” (*Live from the Vault, Vol. 2*). While the meridian divides East from West in Canada, it also runs North to South and separates the geographical regions of both Canada and America. The myth Downie seems to refer to would likely be what Atwood identifies as the overarching theme of American literature – the Frontier (31). In *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, Atwood uses the generalization that a country or culture has “a single unifying and informing symbol at its core” (31) to construct a method of evaluating Canadian literature. She asserts that the overarching theme in Canadian literature is one of survival (32–33). Atwood argues that for American literature the Frontier was “a flexible idea that […] suggests a place that is new, where the old order can be discarded”; it also presented “a line that is always expanding, taking in or ‘conquering’ every fresh virgin territory (be it The West, the rest of the world, outer space, Poverty, or The Regions of the Mind)” (31).

Downie debunks the Frontier myth with a vision of Canada’s emptiness; the landscape is “Left alone to get gigantic / hard, huge and haunted” (*Fully Completely*). It is a place where the “weeds [stand] shoulder high,” and a ferris wheel, a symbol of carnival entertainment, rusts “off in the distance” (*Fully Completely*). Singing, “A generation so much dumber than its parents / came crashing through the window” (*Fully Completely*), Downie reflects on what Al Purdy described in “The Country North of Belleville” as

The country of defeat  
where Sisyphus rolls a big stone  
year after year up the ancient hills  
picnicking glaciers have left strewn  
with centuries’ rubble  
days in the sun  
when realization seeps slow in the mind  
without grandeur or self deception in  
noble struggle  
of being a fool […]  
And this is a country where the young  
leave quickly
unwilling to know what their fathers know
or think the words their mothers do not say. (l. 9–18, 56-59)

In contrast to the myth of the Frontier – a vast virgin expanse waiting to be conquered – Purdy and Downie use the “adolescent dreams of glory [that] haunt the Canadian consciousness (and unconsciousness),” which Frye identifies as a key part of Canadian literary identity, to explain the coming of future generations (827). The young in Purdy’s and Downie’s works leap towards the myth of the Frontier and Frye’s “adolescent dreams of glory” to break out of the boundaries that define Canada. Frye identifies naive and sophisticated dreams in his analysis, where naive dreamers imagine Canadian cities becoming “much bigger than they ought to be […] ‘gateways’ to somewhere else, reconstructed Northwest passages” (827) and sophisticated ones see Canada through the lens of “a Messianic complex […] The myth of the hero brought up in the forest retreat, awaiting the moment when his giant strength will be fully grown and he can emerge into the world” (827). Whether naive or sophisticated, these dreams suggest a desire to escape from the restrictions (or immensity) of the Canadian landscape – both seeking to grow outside of one’s own circumference and becoming greater than the spaces that form oneself. The difference is that the naive dream seeks to find its power externally, in large cities that give meaning to and divide space; the sophisticated dream seeks to find this power within the Canadian hero, whose spirit makes him stand in the foreground of the place he occupies, rather than accepting a place within it. Purdy’s poetry suggests a very different relationship to landscape – one where the self is framed in respect to the landscape, and the division between reality and impossible illusions are kept in check:

A lean land
not fat […]
where the farms are it’s
as if a man stuck
both thumbs in the stony earth and pulled
it apart to make room
enough between the trees
for a wife
and maybe some cows and
room for some
of the more easily kept illusions. (l. 20–21, 24–30)

Like Purdy’s poem, Downie’s “At the Hundredth Meridian” presents the speaker as operating in between greater forces and accepting a smaller place surrounded by them. Downie’s vision of a hundredth meridian is a crossroads between the Great Plains and the Canadian Shield, Eastern Canada and Western Canada, Canada and the United States, nature and civilization, but it is also a place of shifting meanings, or in Saussurean terms, signifiers. Throughout his poetry Downie wrestles with places where the relationship between signified and signifier is vague and uncertain. In “Pigeon Camera,” Downie engages with the division of spaces within a house and within family dynamics:

This house it has its politics
Over there that’s my room
and that’s my sister’s
and that’s my sister
with something we could no longer contain.” (Fully Completely)

The Tragically Hip’s most recent album, Now For Plan A, tackles this theme in the context of the relationship between Downie and his wife after she was diagnosed with breast cancer (Gord Downie On George Stroumboulopoulos Tonight: Full Interview). In “About This Map,” Downie expresses an anxiety where “territories shifted and things get renamed / There’s coups, revolutions, and boundaries blur,” then places himself within the map: “About this map here we are here / See this is me and there you are there.” But ends with a recognition that spaces are not defined by imaginary boundaries, and instead by physical reality: “We don’t live in our heads / Forget about this map” (Now For Plan A). The hundredth meridian becomes a symbol of potential being, where the Mid-West and the historical American Frontier begin, and of Survival, a symbol that participates in Frye’s concepts of Canadian dreams as “‘gateways’ to somewhere else” or the “next year country” (827). Downie reimagines the boundaries between political dividing lines, geographical separations, and the Canadian literary question of “Where is here?” (Frye 826).

In Survival, Atwood’s victim positions in relation to nature in Canadian literature give context to the final verse of this song. She identifies four victim positions: to deny victimization, to acknowledge victimization but believe it is a product of forces outside of one’s own control, to acknowledge victimization but refuse to accept the idea that the role is inevitable, and “to be a creative non-victim” (36–38). Atwood argues that Nature is used as a murder weapon for the Canadian artist, seeming “to polish off far more people in literature than it does in real life” (54). In relation to her victim positions, Atwood adds that Nature in Position Four is where

Man himself is seen as a part of the process; he does not define himself as ‘good’ or ‘weak’ as against a hostile Nature, or as ‘bad’ or ‘aggressive’ as against a passive, powerless Nature. He can accept his own body, including its sexuality, as part of this process, accepting too the versatility that process requires. (63)

“At the Hundredth Meridian” presents a half-murder; the speaker does not die, but recognizes a possible death and presents a will as a result:

If I die of vanity, promise me, promise me
they bury me some place I don’t want to be
You’ll dig me up and transport me, unceremoniously
away from swollen city breeze, garbage bag trees
whispers of disease and the acts of enormity
and lower me slowly and sadly and properly
get Ry Cooder to sing my eulogy
at the hundredth meridian. (Fully Completely)

To understand this will, we are required to know what Downie is referring to with the word “vanity.” The word vanity has its origins in Middle English via Old French from the Latin word
vanus, which means empty or without substance. Vanity in this context is an internalization of empty space: an introspective kenophobia, a fear of not being able to survive internally and, by extension, not being able to accept oneself as part of Nature’s process. In the context of the rest of the verse, vanity is symbolized by the “swollen city breeze, garbage bag trees / whispers of disease and the acts of enormity” (Fully Completely). In essence these symbols represent a place where significant things happen, but their meaning is empty. “Garbage bag trees” is an important symbol of the emptiness — it suggests an empty garbage bag clinging to a leafless tree in winter. The symbol appears twice in Fully Completely; it is also mentioned in “Looking For A Place to Happen.” In these songs garbage bag trees become a symbol of an internalized hollowness.

Downie positions the conquest of the Frontier and Survival along the same lines but frames them in the context of how the self navigates physical and internalized divisions. His speaker occupies the Fourth Position — that of a creative non-victim in relation to nature — because, despite dreams of grandeur, the speaker accepts his own body — whether dead or alive — as occupying a place in nature. The speaker asks to be buried where he doesn’t want to be: the hundredth meridian, where the signifiers are loose and uncertain, and he has to accept his own space in between the forces that shape his perception. Through Downie’s lyrics we come to the understanding that the Canadian identity plays itself out as a struggle of the Canadian person trying to survive with and as Nature, a struggle of resistance, coalescence, and survival across a variety of spheres: geographical, natural, political, and aesthetic.

Downie’s will in “At the Hundredth Meridian” expresses the Canadian theme: the desire to survive and go beyond survival. It engages with questions of where the Canadian speaker can see him or herself in Nature and in the world and how boundaries and emptiness shape the individual, and it hopes to find a form of expression that transcends the narratives forced upon it. Ultimately, to survive in Canada is to accept the small space one occupies in a much larger area. Frye notes that Canada has not produced an artist whose vision was so grand that readers could not see its circumference (821), and that is exactly the point of the Canadian artist. Atwood’s “creative non-victim” accepts him or herself as part of a process within Nature and is thereby able to move freely within it, an identity which creates a wider circumference than that implied in being “a self-created tank against [Nature]” (63). Atwood’s victim model does not apply only to characters within Canadian literature but also to the artist themselves. Still, the possibility of denying one’s place within Canada remains, as many artists do by moving somewhere else. Hence, the artist can view the restrictions of Canada as an uncrossable boundary or believe that they can be overcome. Finally, the artist can accept the relative smallness of the Canadian audience, its diversity and regionalism, and speak to it. Downie’s poetry engages with the ideas of space, boundaries, and meaning, and finds itself returning consistently to “where the great plains begin” — a place that is constantly being changed and transformed. After over thirty years of being one of the biggest bands in Canada and speaking to their Canadian audience, The Tragically Hip have not only survived but thrived. Their work thus far has been looked at from the perspective of how it participates in the Canadian Rock renaissance of the late 1980s and early 1990s, but Downie’s lyrics also require thorough analysis of how he addresses and expands on the themes that similarly traverse Canadian literature.

Bibliography


BRENT HOLMES graduated from Huron University College in 2014 with a Bachelors of Arts in English and Film Studies. He worked full time as Deputy Editor for Volume 108 of Western's daily student newspaper, *The Gazette*. Mr. Holmes will be going to the University of British Columbia for his Masters in Journalism program starting in September.