Guest Editorial

Cultural Production in Canada

As an increasing number of Canadian constituencies buy in to policies associated with the creative economy and the creative city, thereby binding culture and economy ever closer together, the need for scholarly interpretation and analysis of these related phenomena becomes more pressing. How are these neoliberal policies affecting the culture that Canadians make and consume? Are there characteristics of this economic shift particular to the way it is playing out in Canada? How does the production and circulation of culture in Canada knit Canadians into the “global flows and scales” (Boudreau, Keil, & Young, 2009, p. 17) that have become emblematic of the twenty-first century? The articles in this special issue—part of the growing field of cultural production studies—explore how shifting policies, structures, geographies, and experiences are being manifested in Canada. Together, the contributions provide a cross-section of current work about the effects of neoliberal strategies, such as the deregulation of markets and the de-unionization of industries, which have radically altered the landscape of cultural production in Canada. This production studies focus is part of a shift away from choosing either textual analysis or political economy, toward complex, multifaceted analyses eminently suited to analyzing art and culture as sites of negotiation between individuals and organizations conditioned by material structures and policy frameworks (Havens, Lotz, & Tinic, 2009).

The neoliberal turn in global politics and economic policy over the past few decades has given the cultural sector a new prominence as the mechanism of local, regional, and national “branding” (Duxbury, 2011; Jeannotte, 2005; Marontate & Murray, 2010; see also in this issue Aronczyk & Brady; Lussier; Sutherland). At the same time, the cultural worker, entrepreneurial and flexible, has become the ideal vision of the worker in the ever-precarious creative economy (de Peuter, 2014; Léger, 2010; Murray & Gollmitzer, 2012). This paradigm has been heightened by the reliance of the interactive digital economy on the surplus value produced by unpaid “amateurs” (Deuze, 2007). In Canada, the industrialization of cultural production and the shift to the creative economy has been duly noted by artists and cultural producers in many sectors and has provoked a range of responses, aesthetic and political. The global character of these neoliberal processes situates Canadian experiences in a larger cultural field. The Canadian characteristics of these changes, especially in relation to our national history of twinning culture with the formation of national identity, demand some significant shifts in the ways we frame studies of Canadian culture (Cunningham, Cutler, Hearn, Ryan, & Keane, 2005; Druick, 2012; McCullough, 2009; Tinic, 2010).

These profound shifts in how Canadian culture is defined, produced, and circulated have followed a trend toward trade liberalization that took root in the 1990s. In Canada, the adoption of neoliberalism as a core economic value was emblematized

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by the Free Trade Agreement (1988) with the U.S. and the North American Free Trade Agreement (1994) that followed it. Culture was a hotly contested issue in the run-up to each of these agreements, with Canadian cultural producers and scholars arguing that the protection of national sovereignty required the exemption of cultural goods from the logics of trade. However, critics have pointed out that despite the lip service paid to national protection, such measures tended to merely offer monopolies to Canadian-owned corporations that provided little in the way of meaningful and distinctive Canadian content (Beaty & Sullivan, 2006).

Although the cultural industries in Canada have historically been part of a complex—and often problematic—policy apparatus established for the purposes of cultural protection (Dorland, 1996), in the current economic climate, culture is often assumed to be coterminous with commercialization. Concomitantly, creativity is increasingly considered as an input in an industrial framework, characterized, like other sectors, by innovation, entrepreneurialism, and technology (Wagman & Urquhart, 2012). Today, Canadian governing bodies are notably less concerned about the protection of a distinctive culture through subsidization of the arts. While cultural policy continues to support the production of Canadian-made culture, increasingly this work must thrive in global markets in order to survive. In fact, for many cultural industries, the post-nationalism of the export economy highlights a key shift in cultural objectives (Edwardson, 2008).

In this issue of the Canadian Journal of Communication, contributors explore these shifts and tensions in cultural production and labour as they can be understood in relation to film and television (Coutance, Davis, & Zboralska; Patterson; Quail); gaming (Legault & Weststar); music (Sutherland); digital media (Lesage & Smirnova); and live performance (Stephens); as well as spaces of intervention through policy development (Aronczyk & Brady; Lussier) and activism (de Peuter & Cohen). Each of the articles considers how such practices and industries must be critically reframed in the wake of the shift toward placing art and culture at the centre of a creative economy, particularly suited to rendering artists as entrepreneurs. The artist is no longer conceived of as an independent voice so much as an independent contractor engaged in pursuing projects, managing brands, and developing audiences—just like everyone else, only more so. Although labour issues in the creative and cultural industries are currently the topic of substantial research internationally (see Deuze, 2007; Hesmondalgh & Baker, 2010; Raunig, Ray, & Wuggenig, 2011; Ross, 2009), the analysis of the way that cultural work (paid or unpaid) undertaken by Canadians can be considered under the rubric of production studies has so far obtained only preliminary and piecemeal adoption (Côté, 2012; Davis, Shtern, Coutanche, & Godo, 2014; Tinic, 2005).

While production studies in Canada is still in a formative stage, this approach has been well established in other national contexts, most notably the U.S. and the U.K. As an analytic approach, production studies considers the cultural, social, and economic conditions of creative work. Often, though not exclusively, ethnographic, this work situates culture within the context of its production, paying close attention to both constraints and spaces of agency. Production studies considers not only the nature of “production processes,” but also “the nature of labor markets that enable us
to speak of these [creative] sectors in a collective sense” (Flew, 2012, p. 83). Notably, production studies to date have tended to emphasize analyses of media industries (Havens et al., 2009; Mayer, Banks, & Caldwell, 2009), offering critical insight into the everyday experiences of the actors, writers, directors, and producers plying their crafts in film and television (Levine, 2001; Lotz, 2004; Tinic, 2005). The contributions to this special issue expand the rubric of production studies, considering a broader-than-usual range of creative practices, including fine and performing arts as well as the heritage industry, allowing for consideration of a larger field of endeavours constitutive of the creative economy. Methodologically, the studies make a substantial and exciting contribution to understanding Canadian cultural industries, which have, to date, tended to be studied using either policy or textual analysis.

A number of essays in this issue do consider the role of policies—whether specifically designed to foster the creative economy or not—in making spaces for the arts, but all put them into dialogue with the resultant cultural products and practices. Martin Lussier explores the processes that take place at the municipal level in Montréal that aim to promote cultural development, and the resultant proliferation of cultural “quartiers.” He describes the municipalization of culture inspired by Richard Florida’s “creative city” paradigm, which has become a dominant motif in planning over the past two decades (Boudreau et al., 2009). Already considered a culturally vibrant city, Montréal has pursued both economic development and city branding through further investment in and promotion of its cultural spaces. Some, like the Quartier des spectacles, have been redeveloped explicitly with this cultural place-making in mind. Lussier demonstrates the close connection between urban culture and global flows such as tourism.

The use of cultural infrastructure for political branding is not only a tool in municipal development, but also plays out at other political and institutional levels. In their article discussing the renaming of the Canadian Museum of Civilization as the Canadian Museum of History, Melissa Aronczyk and Miranda Brady argue that this remaking of a national cultural institution serves to rebrand Canadian identity and history in the image of the Conservative government. With the renaming came a re-focusing of the museum’s collections and subtle political interventions into its curation of Canadian cultural history. The authors find that, while never innocent of national meta-narratives, the institution is increasingly pushed to collect and display stories that uphold a version of Canada that falls in line with cultural narratives sanctioned by the Harper government. The authors note that this kind of political intervention undercuts the principles of democratic management under which such cultural institutions are ideally mandated to operate.

Notably, however, not all shifts in the policy framework have resulted in increased intervention. Indeed, in some industries, policy intervention is giving way to globally focused economic perspectives. For example, Richard Sutherland considers the diminishing role of Canadian content regulation in a transforming global music industry. Although strong links existed historically between Canadian talent and independent record labels, these connections are progressively weakening. Canadian artists are increasingly signing with international independent labels and, by the same token,
Canada’s independent labels are more apt to sign international musicians. Sutherland argues that these shifts have significant implications for Canadian music industry policy, as the framework for music production becomes increasingly detached from the national context of content regulation.

In the case of the Canadian television industry, Christine Quail finds that factors such as the neoliberalization of global economies, the fragmentation of television audiences, and the rapid development of new production and distribution mechanisms that come with digital media technologies have all produced conditions favourable for the expansion of reality-TV formats. This programming is relatively inexpensive to produce (especially in relation to dramtic programming), and it can be licensed domestically by production firms eager to make “Canadian” versions of international television programming that have already proven successful in other markets. This proliferation of formats has serious implications for Canadian television production. As the industry rapidly alters to meet new consumer demands and capitalize on more lucrative forms of program production, the way that policymakers conceive of “Canadian content” is changing. In turn, scholars need to adapt to these new production frameworks.

As this set of essays shows, there is still a distinguished place in production studies for cultural studies, political economy, and policy analysis. This pulse-taking of the Canadian cultural sector shows how dramatically it has changed since the advent of neoliberal policies such as NAFTA, with culture being made central to economic revitalization of cities, for instance. These studies all combine an analysis of the conditions of cultural production with an investigation of what they are producing. Increasingly, Canadian cultural production of all sorts is becoming integrated into international markets, where it must live or die based on success on market terms. At the same time, cultural identity, always a political project, has seemedly become even more connected to divisive sectarian politics, as in the case of the Museum of Canadian History.

Over half of the articles in this issue approach the study of the lived experience of cultural production by using ethnographic methods, demonstrating the increasing importance granted in the field to experiential discourse. Lindsay Stephens’ study of circus performers provides for an insightful analysis of the tension between art and commerce in the consolidating field of “circus arts.” Even as Cirque du Soleil has spearheaded a global resurgence of “big circus,” in Québec a constellation of independent circus performers and troupes has arisen. The 2009 recognition of “circus arts” as a distinct form eligible for funding through the Canada Council for the Arts has brought to the fore the development of new forms of recognized cultural production in Canada. Stephens finds that the glamorization of art and creativity serves to promote the precarity of cultural workers, who accept low pay and sometimes exploitative working conditions as part of the dues that must be paid while developing a creative career in the new economy.

Similarly, in their ethnographic study of video game developers (VGDs), Marie-Josée Legault and Johanna Weststar find that despite problematic labour conditions such as long hours, uncompensated overtime, and poor work-life balance, the project-based, highly individualist framework of the technology sector makes these workers particularly resistant to unionization. Although the authors’ interviews with Montréal-
based VGDs found that some conditions conducive to collective action were present among these workers, they deemed the overall framework of existing trade unions in Canada to be incompatible with this industry.

It is into this terrain of often precarious creative work that Greig de Peuter and Nicole Cohen also offer a critical intervention. Their interview with Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge explores some of the ongoing tensions in creative work in Canada. Throughout their careers, Condé and Beveridge have used politicized art to shed light on labour struggles and the lives of working people. This activism and art practice brings to the surface many of the challenges faced by creative workers in Canada. Condé and Beveridge have worked to ameliorate these conditions, founding the Independent Artists’ Union (IAU) in the 1980s, and turning creative work and labour struggle into the object of their visual art. While academic analysis of the “creative economy” may be relatively new, Condé and Beveridge offer important insight into cultural work and labour struggle as a historical object of inquiry. This interview stems from de Peuter and Cohen’s larger research and advocacy project with Enda Brophy, Cultural Workers Organize (http://culturalworkersorganize.org/), which engages with the labour politics of the creative economy.

Each of these studies illustrates well the complex terrain of cultural work in Canada, with participants in the field constrained and enabled by a set of social and political forces. This tension is particularly evident in Natasha Patterson’s analysis of women’s participation in Canadian reality-TV programming. Through interviews with former contestants on popular shows, such as Canada’s Next Top Model, she finds evidence of the precarity and exploitation that is characteristic of the neoliberal workplace. She also finds that participants exhibit agency and resistance as they retroactively reflect upon their albeit limited strategies to undermine the production process and protect themselves from an invasive and often disrespectful media apparatus.

Michael Coutanche, Charles Davis, and Emilia Zborsalska find similar tensions at play in the narratives offered by screenwriters working in Toronto. The authors conducted 50 in-depth interviews, bringing to light a complex narrative of the screenwriter’s experience of cultural production. Working in a highly competitive yet cash-strapped industry characterized by having more hopeful participants than can be supported, interview subjects were often cognizant of the challenges and constraints in their chosen field of work. Although they generally agreed upon certain conditions, such as the lack of audiences for Canadian cultural products, disagreements arose over the cause of career struggles. For example, some interviewees were reluctant to acknowledge the existence of structural constraints, such as racism, sexism, and homophobia, which might disproportionately impact specific participants in the field. In general, creative occupations that are reliant upon mentorship and word of mouth tend to reproduce the demographics of participants, decreasing the likelihood that the field will grow more diverse over time. In the case of screenwriters working in the Canadian market, Coutanche, Davis, and Zborsalska note that the struggle to obtain work and produce creatively compelling stories is made all the more difficult by a noted lack of interest from Canadian audiences who, by and large, prefer to consume American cultural products.
In their contribution, Frédérik Lesage and Svetlana Smirnova investigate the pressures to “keep up” that afflict people whose careers are reliant upon knowledge of everyday “media life” software programs, such as Photoshop. Learning the software, sometimes in order to be able to teach about it, is a virtually constant process for many cultural workers that is usually done on the user’s own time. Moreover, the invisibility of the software, they argue, belies the fact that built-in protocols can have profound effects on what is produced in various creative practices. Technology, in this perspective, becomes more than a tool. It becomes a medium in its own right. Lesage and Smirnova argue that using a biographical approach to Photoshop helps to shed light on its presence in the life of so many cultural workers.

As these studies show, there is a growing momentum behind ethnographic methods in Canadian production studies. Engaging with the makers and participants in creative enterprise demonstrates the complex negotiations undertaken by individual subjects in relation to a network of factors that range from the economic constraints and policy imperatives of various cultural industries to the possibilities of resistance and political organization. These approaches have the capacity to complicate the stories we tell about cultural production in Canada, giving insight to the lived experiences of what are often perceived as naturalized infrastructural conditions.

As this overview indicates, the contributions to this issue demonstrate the impressive vibrancy of production studies and its suitability for the study of Canadian culture at this juncture. The consideration of art and artists as instruments in a cultural economy is certainly not unique to Canada. However, here, as elsewhere, these changes have sparked an urgent need to pose new questions and develop new methodologies. The articles in this special issue give a fine-grained analysis of experiences of the Canadian creative economy from a number of exciting new perspectives. In doing so they demonstrate beyond doubt that cultural production studies has an important role to play in analyzing the current economic and cultural configuration.

References
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