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Selling Canada to Canadians: Collective Memory, National Identity, and Popular Culture

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Collective Memory, National Identity, and Popular Culture
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Author's Note:

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Abstract:

Two media endeavours, the *Heritage Minutes* and the CBC documentary *Canada: A People's History*, hope to serve as a corrective to Canadians' lack of interest in their history and to bolster national identity. However, the producers do not want to appear propagandistic in a country where there is conflict about what the shape of the nation should be. They accomplish this by appealing to the "on the spot" authority of journalistic representation and the emotional immediacy of dramatic story-telling. They also emphasize the multi-cultural and multi-perspectival nature of Canada's past. However, ultimately these efforts exist within a larger narrative about the "story of Canada," where events of the past are framed in terms of their contribution or relevance to the present shape of the nation-state. In this way, these programs reveal their purpose and, as collective memory scholars might predict, press the past into the service of present aims.

Selling Canada to Canadians:

Collective Memory, National Identity, and Popular Culture

Conventional wisdom in Canada suggests that the nation's collective memory is in trouble. This article examines the relationship between collective memory, nationalism, and popular culture through two particular Canadian productions that use popular media, specifically television, to address the perceived failure in collective memory. These two national memory projects, being broadcast on television and in the movie theatres, are: the *Heritage Minutes* produced by the Charles R. Bronfman (CRB) Foundation and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's (CBC) documentary *Canada: A People's History*. The *Heritage Minutes* have been a familiar part of the Canadian media landscape since 1991, when they started airing in movie theatres and on all the major Canadian television networks (Cameron, 1995). Sixty-six one minute vignettes featuring a wide variety of historical events and figures have been made to date. *Canada: A People's History*, on the other hand, is a more recent endeavor. This thirty hour documentary series, setting out to address Canada's entire history up into the 1980s aired its first episode in October of 2000, and continues to run in the 2001 season. This ambitious, twenty-five million dollar project is a co-operative venture between English Canada's CBC and French Canada's network, Radio-Canada (www.cbc.ca/history). Although two distinct cultural products, with a number of structural differences, the *Heritage Minutes* and *Canada: A People's History* have similarities of organization and purpose that make both relevant to this investigation. They are similar in terms of timing, a number of their production choices, and their stated purpose.

The *Heritage Minutes* and *Canada: A People's History* are particularly interesting to consider through the lens of collective memory studies because of the self-conscious way in which they set out to fill the gaps of Canadian collective memory. These programs are not just popular

television, they are supposed to be good for you. The *Heritage Minutes*, which air during commercial breaks, come across as public service announcements for the Canadian soul. For its part, the documentary is an initiative of the CBC, the Canadian network, half of whose funding comes from taxpayers, charged with providing the kind of national public service that, it is assumed, commercial networks will be unable to provide (Atherton, 2001). In fact, in these turbulent economic times in which the mood is to cut back drastically on government spending, the popular and critical success of the documentary has proven invaluable to the network in demonstrating its value to the government and the public (Bethune, 2001). An editorial writer attributes the fact that, in a year-end poll for 2000, “only one third of respondents wanted to see the CBC sold to the private sector” to the success of the new documentary (*Toronto Star*, 2001).

As will be demonstrated in this paper, the producers believe these cultural products will bolster Canadian collective memory, which in turn will contribute to strengthening the nation, and even save it from threats from both without and within. This idea about the nation-saving or strengthening functions of these media initiatives seems to point to the ever-looming question mark of Canadian politics – Quebec separatism. For both the *Heritage Minutes* and *Canada: A People's History*, the very decision to take Canada as the relevant unit of representation is political because separatists are likely to view this move as federalist propaganda. The way these productions tell the “story of Canada” points to a balancing act between an undeniable ideological and political position – that Canada is one nation, sea to shining sea, and it ought to stay that way – and a need to not be too heavy-handed or monolithic with this message, thereby stirring up the very conflict that these programs hope to repair. The balancing act in these productions is between the representations of diversity and unity – not a challenge unique

perhaps to Canada – but one that seems particularly precarious in a nation where the future shape of the country is an issue never far from the top of the political agenda.

Part of the predictable inferiority complex that Canada seems to have as a result of living next door to the United States is that, while America seems to have a history characterized by bloody and decisive revolutions, larger than life heroes, and powerful myths and grand narratives such as those of Manifest Destiny, the Frontier, and rugged individualism (myths which have, of course, been debunked and challenged), Canada's history is widely thought to be a nation wrought of polite "compromise, not conflict" (Bickley, 2000). These programs construct their authority to represent the past in a way that appears studiously to avoid constructing noticeably grand narratives of Canadian history and identity. At the same time, the *Heritage Minutes* and *Canada: A People's History* strive to produce something stirring and compelling – something that Canadians can get excited about, and that will elicit the kind of national pride in the past that the makers of these programs and others seem to believe will be instrumental in the survival and strength of Canada.

How then, do the *Heritage Minutes* and *Canada: A People's History* go about creating cultural products that will bolster collective memory in such a way as to strengthen the nation, while simultaneously effacing this goal? I suggest here that there are two approaches that they do this. First, these programs construct their representations as somehow "unmediated," thereby encouraging audiences to feel that they are as directly connected to the past as possible. They appeal to the "on the spot" authority of journalistic representation and the emotional immediacy of dramatic story-telling to do so. Secondly, they emphasize the multi-cultural and multi-perspectival nature of Canada's past, so as to avoid accusations of producing a monolithic perspective that is propagandistic. However, ultimately, these efforts do exist within a larger

identifiable narrative about the story of Canada, where events of the past are framed in terms of their contribution or relevance to the present shape of the nation-state. Therefore, these programs ultimately reveal their purpose and, as collective memory scholars might predict, press the past into the service of present aims.

Filling in the Gaps of Collective Memory

The perceived need to create these memory projects lies in the belief that gaps exist in Canadians' knowledge of their past and, if only they could be filled, a current lack of shared identity might be corrected. Noted collective memory scholar Barry Schwartz (1982, p.374) states that "Recollection of the past is an active, constructive process, not a simple matter of retrieving information. To remember is to place a part of the past in the service of conceptions and needs of the present." In this case, the cultural elite engaged in the production of the *Heritage Minutes* and *Canada: A People's History* take as their goal the continuation and strengthening of Canada from "sea to shining sea," where despite our differences, Canadians can rally around some unifying sense of "who we are" and "where we came from."

Illustrating this sentiment is the fact that leading figures with both of these projects have cited their observation that Canadians find their history "boring" as motivation to undertake the task of filling in the gaps of Canadian memory. Charles R. Bronfman, head of the CRB, suggests that the education system has failed Canadians in teaching history properly. Bronfman funded a Heritage Quiz about Canadian knowledge of "key" events and people in the nation's history, and was dismayed to learn that 40% of the representative sample of Canadian adults and children could not name Canada's first prime minister (Cameron, 1995). This ignorance was part of the impetus for Charles Bronfman to pour a fortune into the *Heritage Minutes*. Similar to Bronfman,

Mark Starowicz, executive producer of *A People's History* describes as part of the objective of the documentary “to show that Canadian history is not boring” (Cobb, 2000). This goal must have seemed like quite a challenge to Starowicz as he made the rounds to Canadian corporations, in search of sponsorship for the program, and faced widespread doubt in the business community that Canadians would bother tuning in to representations of their past (McQuaig, 2000).

The notion that Canadian history is inherently not worth remembering is summed up well in a *Washington Post* article in which the writer suggests that a certain portion of Canadian elite has resigned itself to the end of Canadian national identity. Pearlstein writes

Over the years, Canadians might have coalesced around a shared sense of history but for the fact that they have so little of it they consider worth remembering. The country never fought a revolution or a civil war, pioneered no great social or political movement, produced no great world leader, and committed no memorable atrocities – as one writer put it, Canada has no Lincolns, no Gettysburgs, and no Gettysburg addresses. (Pearlstein, 2000)

Few Canadians would enjoy hearing from an American newspaper that their history just doesn't measure up. The attitude described in the *Post* is reminiscent of Lasch's (1995) description of the new elites who, he says, because they function culturally and financially across national borders, no longer relate to national, or even local loyalties. However, judging by popular wisdom, many Canadians who do not fit into the category of this “new elite” would also agree that Canadian history does seem to lack events with the kind of drama that Canadians have been able to rally around.

In contrast to the Canadians described in the *Washington Post* article, the cultural elites who fund and make the *Heritage Minutes* and *A People's History* are still invested in preserving the nation and, following from this, fostering knowledge about and identification with national history. They direct the blame for Canadians' lack of interest in their past to educators and historians who have failed to communicate to Canadians how exciting their history *really* is. As suggested by historian Irving Abella

For too long Canadians have dismissed their history as boring and lifeless, as if some potent industrial-strength cleanser had been poured on it and bleached out its colour and drama. *A People's History* has provided a powerful antidote. It has restored our history to us with all its vibrancy, surprises and humanity. (Abella, 2000)

Here the *true* history is interesting, but while in the past Canadians have been denied access to its full "colour and drama," the *Minutes* and the CBC documentary believe that they can re-inject the necessary interest. Starowicz compares Canadians' attitude to their history to the Americans, who, he suggests, would never accept that their history was dull, even if they knew very little about it. He places the blame on educators and on the failures of the media system, saying

...that's a testament of how much the cultural communication system and the presentation of our stories has been sanitized for our own air waves but [sic] we have come to this stage where we're surprised...that there was a nobility to our story, that there was a human condition here that it [sic] was eternal. (*The National*, 2001)

Bronfman, Starowicz, and others appear to believe that the normal mechanisms of collective memory have failed, leading them to take it upon themselves to fill in the gaps.

Further, they claim that Canadians are actually "hungry" for information about their past, and therefore, for this kind of programming. The Canadian news magazine *Maclean's* features the

headline, “There is a hunger out there to hear our stories” among Canadians, quoting producer Mark Starowicz, and implicitly endorses this view throughout the article (Bethune, 2000). The CBC points to the high ratings for the documentary, and the tremendous response on the electronic bulletin boards, as proof of Canadians’ desire for this kind of programming. The makers of the *Heritage Minutes* also point to the popularity of their productions, particularly the way the *Minutes* have been spoofed and satirized as proof of their cultural resonance, and the success of spin-off historical and educational activities organized by the parent Historica Foundation. The critical and popular success of these programs has bolstered their claim to be meeting the needs and desires of Canadians, who have been wanting to feel more connected to a national past, as opposed to the notion that they are manufacturing or imposing an interest in history on the public.

Q: Why does all this matter? A: “Giving our past a future”

Why are these individuals and organizations so concerned about Canadian ignorance of their history? Many commentators go so far as to say that they see a strong collective memory and shared understanding of the past as crucial to the very survival of the nation. This notion has been commented on by a number of memory scholars who have observed that collective memory is functional to the cohesion and maintenance of the nation or the group. Zelizer (1995) summarizes this approach, saying

Rather than be taken at face value as a simple act of recall, collective memory is evaluated for the ways in which it helps us to make connections – to each other over time and space, and to ourselves. At the heart of memory’s study, then, is its usability, its invocation as a tool to defend different aims and agendas (p.226).

LeGoff (1992), who identifies *too much* memory as potentially burdensome to a nation, also recognizes the difficulty of a lack of collective memory to the strength of the group. He writes, “the *known* and *recognized* absence or brevity of the past can also create serious problems for the development of a collective mentality and identity – for instance in young nations...” (LeGoff 1992, p.2). Anderson (1991) has argued that nations are merely imaginative constructs, communities that we can never truly know or see, but that we agree to put our faith in. Collective memory can be understood as one of the important imaginative ties that bind, without which individuals might feel less inclined to truly “believe in” their nation, and therefore to act in its interests. The individuals behind *The Heritage Minutes* and *Canada: A People’s History* appear to subscribe to this view.

Nora (1997) has suggested about *lieux de mémoires*, or sites of memory, that, “These bastions buttress our identities, but if what they defended were not threatened, there would be no need for them” (p.7). The notion that *lieux de mémoires* are responding to a threat is reflected in the slogan of the *Heritage Minutes*, “Giving our past a future” (www.histori.ca). This phrase presents a fairly unambiguous statement about the goals of the *Minutes*, and points to what might be at stake. “Giving our past a future” suggests that maybe, without these *Minutes* or similar efforts to revitalize collective memory, Canada’s past would have *no* future.

Both the *Minutes* and *A People’s History* implicitly present themselves as working against the various threats to Canada’s survival. This anxiety clearly stems from national unity being constantly threatened by the anglophone-francophone split. However, the angst also seems to include an ever-increasing east-west split (as amply demonstrated by the 2000 federal election results), concern about cultural assimilation and economic domination by the United States, and the threat of globalization to Canada’s economic, political, and cultural autonomy. The concern

that these media producers have for the future of Canadian identity seems validated by opinions such as that described in the *Washington Post* that “the fight for Canadian distinctiveness is fundamentally over” (Pearlstein, 2000). The possibility that the *Minutes*, the CBC documentary, and a stronger collective memory in general might play a role in the nation’s survival is au courant in the talk surrounding these productions.

This sentiment is particularly well-expressed in a *Toronto Star* review of “Proud and Free,” a production which introduced thirteen new *Heritage Minutes* to the Canadian public in 1995

In form and content, Proud and Free is a reminder of how anxiously yet tenuously we hold onto our notions of cultural integrity, to our extraordinary and mostly unsung history, to our fragmented heritage, to our land. And in a TV universe about to be bombarded by foreign satellite channels, it raises the question of how important Canadian content is. (Quill, 1995)

Starowicz, executive producer of *A People’s History*, picks up the theme by specifically identifying globalization as a factor that might account for Canadians’ apparent rising interest in their past. He explained the high ratings his series has received to the *Montreal Gazette*, saying

Over the last few years, there has been an erosion of identity, a rising defiance, a sense of losing the things that define us...people don’t like being run over by the global machine. We want to know how we got here. We want to know what we stand for. (quoted in Curran, 2000)

These collective memory projects, then, get framed not just as interesting but as important, even crucial, to the survival of the nation. Tom Axworthy, executive director of the CRB Foundation in 1997, said as much in a speech about the *Minutes*

If the foundation of our country is cracked – if our citizens cannot speak to each other,

if there is no common point of reference, if there is no sharing of values, if there is no partnership of purpose, if we do not know or appreciate each other's stories – then no amount of constitutional jerryrigging can overcome the fissures of the San Andreas fault. (Axworthy, 1997)

Here again, we see a belief in the “magic” of collective memory to solve problems where more instrumental approaches, such as political agreements, have failed.

As clear as the makers of these programs appear to be about the purpose of these programs, in the programs themselves they must negotiate their representations of the past so as not to alienate viewers with what might be perceived as a federalist agenda, while still providing a narrative that demonstrates that diversity can exist and flourish within a unified conception of Canada. How do they do this? I will discuss two ways that the programs de-emphasize the hegemonic purpose of these media initiatives, but also demonstrate that these strategies are overwhelmed by the larger narrative of Canadian unity within which the representations exist.

Construction of Authority to Represent the Past

The *Heritage Minutes* and *Canada: A People's History*, being in the politically sensitive position of representing a national past to a nation continuously in dialogue about the meaning of being Canadian, strategically take steps to draw attention away from the various processes of mediation that have occurred between the stuff of history and the viewing moment. Many of these production decisions also make the programs work well as entertaining television, thereby furthering the goal of drawing Canadians into their history.

Both programs make the decision not to show a narrator, leaving any narration as audio only. The narrators in both the *Heritage Minutes* and *Canada: A People's History* are not historians, or

particular public personalities, but rather unidentified voices that, because of their anonymity, carry little inherent meaning or political inflection. The anonymity and invisibility of the narrators leads these productions to be dominated by the live action that unfolds before us as realistic drama.

The *Heritage Minutes* are self-contained narratives that present a problem and see it to resolution within sixty seconds. So, for example, we see in 1914 Nellie Clung of Manitoba face an ornery premier who mocks her desire to vote, and by the end of the spot she has rallied women behind her and won the franchise for women in her province. The audience also has the dramatic satisfaction of seeing her jibe the very premier who had spurred her to action in the first place, as she says “I’m sure you don’t want your photograph taken with a woman who’s - not nice” (Historica!, 2002a). Although the narrator frames the action for us, explaining the setting and describing some of the action, our attention is focused on the actors and settings that appear to authentically relay the events and personalities of the past.

However, as programs that set out to bolster and shape collective memory, the *Minutes* and *A People’s History* must succeed in entertaining the Canadian public. They cannot afford to get so bogged down in historical detail that they lose people’s interest. Although these producers are setting out to promote Canadian history, they are also mindful of Canadians’ famed lack of interest in their history. Patrick Watson, who directs some of the *Minutes*, explained that in planning the concept, producers wanted to “avoid the temptation to be too informative” (Boone, 1998). They rejected the “historian sitting on a log in the woods and telling a story” approach in favour of highly produced dramatic action. Watson explains

Our job was to engage viewers, and the instrument of engagement is drama. The mode we had to get into, if we were going to reach young people in particular, was

movies....It's less doing something about a story than taking you into a presence with characters of events so you get the texture and the smell and the emotional quality.

(Boone, 1998)

For example, in the "Halifax Explosion" Minute, we learn about the explosion of a munitions ship in Halifax Harbour in 1917 through the experience, and attributed words, of one of the heroes of that incident, Vince Coleman, who told bystanders to run as well as warning an approaching train to stop over the wire, thereby dooming himself. In the last sequence of the Minute, we see Coleman breathe a sigh of relief as he receives confirmation that the train has received his message, and the next moment we see him rise in horror as he hears the ship blow (Historica!, 2002b). The mode of the *Heritage Minutes* is drama such as this, but the technique of "taking you into the presence" through eye-witness perspectives is very similar to *A People's History* approach.

As in the *Heritage Minutes*, in *A People's History*, the story of Canada is told by an off-screen narrator, who is not a historian, supplemented by action sequences, scenery, and speeches from actors playing individuals from the past. These actors speak the actual words of the people they are playing, found in various historical documents. For example, we participate vicariously in the first July 1st celebration of Confederation in 1867 by hearing and seeing the eyewitness account of a young girl who saw the fireworks and revelry in Hamilton, Ontario (Starowicz, 2001c). Or even farther back, we learn what it was like for Chief Donnacona to live his final days in Europe, having been taken there against his wishes by the explorer Jacques Cartier (Starowicz, 2000).

The makers of *A People's History* have explained on their web site and to reporters that their choice to use the actual words of past Canadians in the series lets history speak *directly* to

viewers, thereby addressing some of the problems normally associated with historical interpretation. The mantra of the series, we are told, is, “Canadian history, through the eyes of the people who lived it” (CBC, 2000b). This comment reveals the tactical move on the producers’ part to legitimate what they show. The series is organized around the first-person accounts and the texts that get presented as directly connecting us to our forebears. In the earlier half of the CBC documentary, before photographs and films are available, the actors playing the characters of the past speak directly to us, in close-up, with a direct eye gaze. They speak the words that have been uncovered in letters and diaries, and in the case of the First Nations characters, the words that have been passed down in the oral tradition. In fact, while a character from the past speaks, the camera frequently lovingly moves over the old texts that these messages have been found in. We cannot read them necessarily (sometimes we can see a few words), but this approach reassures us that what we are hearing is no fanciful historical interpretation. In this way, the documentary emphasizes the faithfulness to accurate facts that may reassure the skeptical viewer. In later episodes that depict the more recent past, the use of actors playing characters is largely eschewed in favour of close-ups on photographs of the individuals we hear from.

Another common technique in the production is to cut back and forth between a visual representation of a character or event – be it a painting, drawing, or photograph – and the actor or scene in the series. For example, in Episode Seven, “Rebellion and Reform,” we cut frequently between contemporary paintings depicting battles between Canadian rebels and British colonial authorities, and the live recreations which, we see, closely mirror the earlier, authentic sources (Starowicz, 2001a). Similarly, in Episode Fourteen, called “The Crucible,” detailing Canada’s involvement in WWII, we cut between National Film Board live footage of the disaster at

Dieppe and dramatic shots in colour that emphasize the drama and pathos of that moment, such as a boot floating in bloody water near the beach (Starowicz, 2001b).

In *Canada: A People's History*, the producers generally de-emphasize the participation of historians in the making of the program in favour of the idea that the documentary is really just a form of journalism applied to the past. In the explanations of the CBC documentary provided on the web site and in the television special “The Making of *Canada: A People's History*,” the main role of capturing and representing the past is assigned to journalists, “With a journalistic approach, front-line documentary filmmakers have turned their cameras to the past,” whereas the historian’s role is presented as merely ensuring accuracy (CBC, 2000c). Starowicz explains further

What has worked best is the documentary style; the directors of *A People's History* chose to approach historical events like a television news crew shooting raw footage, rather than acting as movie makers manipulating events with constant takes and edits. (quoted in Abella, 2000)

Here, Starowicz characterizes journalism as a form of representation that has first-hand access to events as they unfold, thereby framing it as more reliable and trustworthy than the whims of movie producers. Starowicz and the producers of *A People's History* may well have been successful with this strategy, as suggested by the following editorial comment printed in the *Toronto Star*: “[Starowicz] skillfully prevented the series from being bogged down in debates about historical accuracy by approaching each episode with strict journalistic discipline” (*Toronto Star*, 2001).

Even though the producers of *Canada: A People's History* make it clear that the documentary must be entertaining and engaging, they present their journalistic approach, buttressed by the participation of historians, as evidence that they haven't sacrificed "fact" for fiction

In reproducing historical events the team faced a risk that arises with any historical re-enactment: the possibility of sacrificing reality for fiction, in search of a more spectacular production. In this case, the series' journalistic approach, enforced by the team's editorial consultants and historical advisers, guarded against fictionalization. (CBC, 2000a).

The documentary is even described as "reality TV," referring to its portrayal of first-person accounts and its dependence on primary sources (CBC, 2000b).

Common sense suggests that the productions' use of a "journalistic" approach cannot avoid the distortions of historical narrative, as these criticisms can apply equally to journalistic narratives. Hayden White (1992) explains one pretense to objectivity as

Historical events are supposed to consist of or manifest a congeries of "real" or "lived" stories, which have only to be uncovered or extracted from the evidence and displayed before the reader to have their truth recognized immediately and intuitively. (p.37)

This strategy is precisely the one used by *A People's History* and the *Minutes* in portraying Canadian history through the eyes (and words) of the people who lived it. By simply reproducing those words, or reproducing the live action visually for viewers, the producers aim to strengthen their claim to authenticity.

Secondly, according to White (1992), "Narrative histories usually employ so-called natural or ordinary, rather than technical, languages" (p.37). This approach is certainly the case in both *A*

People's History and the *Minutes*, which reject the appearance and the words of the “technical” historians for the more “natural,” journalistic writing.

Both the *Heritage Minutes* and *Canada: A People's History* make production choices that construct their representations as authoritative, specifically through the lack of mediation and interpretation apparent on the surface. In both, the emotional resonance of dramatic stories, and particularly in the documentary the cultural authority of journalistic representation, legitimate these productions as providing the most direct access possible to the past. Although undeniably bias and interpretation come into play in the hundreds of decisions and selections that go into making these productions, these decisions remain behind the scenes of these fairly naturalistic programs.

Diversity and Unity

John Bodnar (1992), based on his examination of public memory in the United States, argues that public memory is a site of current struggles over political and ideological meanings. If, as those who are making and viewing these productions say, the *Heritage Minutes* and *Canada: A People's History* are helping Canadians understand who they are and what kind of nation Canada is, then in fact these are fairly political endeavours. The felt need to interrogate the past and “sell Canada to Canadians” seen in these projects resonates with a trend observed in the United States in the 1980s towards calling for better history education and more patriotic celebration of the past, illustrated for example by Lynn Cheney's 1987 report on history education in America's schools (Bodnar, 1992; Frisch, 1989). This push has been interpreted as a reaction to the pluralistic trends of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as to the emergence of social and cultural history over the more established military and political history. A similar view has been

espoused by Canadian historian J.L. Granatstein who released a book in 1998 called “Who killed Canadian history?”, in which he lamented the chipping away at history of the nation-building variety by social history projects like studies of “housemaid’s knee in Belleville in the 1890s” (McKillop, 1999, p.273).

Bodnar (1992) specifically identifies the struggle between vernacular culture, emerging out of the experiences and interests of “ordinary” people and their groups, and official culture, which takes the nation and the maintenance of the status quo as its starting point. While vernacular memory rests on the grounded experiences and struggles of individuals, official memory relies on more abstract symbols and principles, such as notions of patriotism and duty. The tension that Bodnar describes between the vernacular and the official in public memory maps well onto the balancing act between discourses of diversity and unity in the *Heritage Minutes* and *A People’s History*.

An emphasis on showing events from multiple perspectives is another way that the producers demonstrate that their programs are resisting the temptation to present a master narrative of Canadian history. As Zelizer (1995) points out, the tension between the particular and the universal is a challenge that collective memory must always deal with because the notion of a “collective” is always to some extent more idealized than realized. In the case of Canadian national identity, the ability of collective memory to be “simultaneously particularistic and universal” is especially challenging as the unity question continues to be on the Canadian political agenda (Zelizer, 1995, p.230). By taking Canada as their unit of representation, these media initiatives are engaged in a subjunctive endeavour, where the fellow feeling and shared understanding of “our” past must be understood more in terms of “ought” than “is.” Rex Murphy, a well-known journalist and CBC talking head hosted “Proud and Free,” the program

that introduced thirteen new *Heritage Minutes* in 1995 just a few months before the latest referendum on the separation of Quebec from Canada. Referring to the subjunctive appeal of the *Minutes* he said, “Canada is a country in which a simple word like ‘we’ has not yet achieved a fully satisfactory emotional – and, in some cases – political definition” (quoted in Quill, 1995).

The producers of the *Heritage Minutes* and *Canada: A People’s History* have demonstrated their awareness of the problem described by Murphy. For example, Starowicz announces his awareness of the instability of “Canada,” saying the country “is an ever adjusting interplay of alliances and accommodations” established on a “complex multi-partite equilibrium of our mutual accommodation” (quoted in *Toronto Star*, 2000). The very title of the series emphasizes the multi-cultural nature of Canada, and assures audiences that Canada will be represented as the aggregate of different people’s stories rather than as an all-encompassing, big idea. Similarly, each *Heritage Minute* ends with the slogan, “A Part of our Heritage,” thereby emphasizing the partial nature of any account in any one minute. The *Heritage Minutes* and *Canada: A People’s History* share a common approach in their emphasis on the multi-cultural, multi-perspectival nature of Canadian history.

The CRB Foundation draws attention to its attempt to be inclusive and representative of all that might qualify as Canadian on its web site by allowing surfers to search the sixty-six *Minutes* by chronology, region, or theme (www.histori.ca). The themes that the *Minutes* are organized under range from groups like the First Nations, and Women, to areas of interest such as Sports and Exploration, to more general, or collective, themes like Canadian Symbols and Building Democracy. In this manner, the organization of the *Minutes* draws attention to the inclusive and wide-ranging nature of the featured topics. In the CBC documentary, there is also an emphasis on inclusive representations of groups within Canada. As the characters of *A People’s History* speak

directly to us, and as we see the past “through their eyes,” we are asked to identify with French and English, First Nations and immigrants alike.

A People's History emphasizes inclusion both in the content of the documentary and in the process of creating it. Much has been made of the fact that this documentary was the first co-production between the CBC and the francophone analogue of the CBC, Radio-Canada, and that the documentary is produced in both languages (Cobb, 2000). Similarly, the CRB makes both French and English versions of their *Minutes*. *A People's History* web site also mentions the fact that the documentary was filmed “in every region of the country,” and that the producers made great efforts to consult with historians and other experts from many different groups (CBC, 2000c).

Although the programs certainly represent those who we might consider the heroes and heroines of history, who already have their names in the history books, they also both go out of their way to show how ordinary people, like you and I, were heroes in their own way, and the role they played in building the nation. The *Minutes* have certainly revived heroes who had been forgotten, such as Maurice Ruddick, known as The Singing Miner, who kept his co-workers' spirits up while they were trapped for eight days during the Springhill, Nova Scotia mining disaster of 1958 (Hustak, 1993). Although proclaimed a hero in his own day, his story soon faded into obscurity.

However, the *Minutes* don't just revive heroes, they also present individuals, or groups, as heroes who may not have been understood as such by their contemporaries. For example, one *Minute* dramatizes the importance of the local midwife in rural communities in the late nineteenth century (Historica!, 2002c). Another, named “Soddie,” depicts the struggle of European immigrants on the prairie, who are forced to build their first home out of the very sod

on which they will be eking out their living (Historica!, 2002c). The *Heritage Minutes* present these acts of everyday heroism as equally deserving of their own *Minutes*, and therefore present a model of heroism, and of what we ought to remember, that is more inclusive than more narrow definitions of heroism that might only recognize the kind that leads to medals of valour, and the like. In the words of the CRB Foundation itself, “What is a hero? *Heritage Minutes* present heroism in many forms, from comic book superheroes to courageous individuals who have risked their lives to save others. You might say that every *Heritage Minute* portrays Canadian heroes” (Historica!, 2001). In fact, even though Charles Bronfman cited his horror of Canadians’ ignorance of the “basic facts” of Canadian history as motivation to start this project, it is noteworthy that not one *Heritage Minute* features a Canadian prime minister as its main character.

The makers of *A People’s History* seem to have taken a page out of the *Minutes’* How-to book for promoting Canadian history. The narrative tacks back and forth between the kinds of people who already have their names in history books, and the “ordinary” folk, who we only know about because they have left us their stories in documents such as letters, diaries, and court transcripts. The documentary, like the *Minutes*, seeks to “fill in the gaps” of history that the education system has left open, and also to fill in some of the human interest, creating a connection to “our forebears” that mere knowledge of the “facts” of history might not normally include. So, for example, the documentary creates empathy for victims of the Japanese-Canadian internment camps of the Second World War by letting us hear from a particular Japanese-Canadian woman whose experience of that time is available to us in both texts and photographs (Starowicz, 2001b).

How do the *Minutes* and *A People's History* attempt to solve the problem of representing the history of Canada and Canadians when those very terms are contested? As I have suggested, one way is to emphasize multiple perspectives. I would also argue that these media representations making the widest possible interpretation of what counts as “Canada,” and of who and what we can understand as “Canadian,” is an attempt to solve this difficulty. Both programs take the current geo-political boundaries of Canada, and map them backwards onto history in order to figure out what counts. This leads to the documentary presenting the earliest chronological moment in the history of Canada as the hypothesized immigration of people from Siberia across the Bering Strait, believed to have occurred approximately 15 000 years ago. In fact, making the land a character was a conscious decision on the part of the CBC producers, as suggested by statements on their web site such as that, in the first episode, “When the World Began”, “An important part of the story...was conveyed by images of the land itself” (CBC, 2000a). Canada, then, is conceptualized as a character itself, as if the land that would *one day*, perhaps for a relatively brief time, be known to some people as Canada, thought of itself that way thousands of years before that day would come.

Similar to *A People's History* featuring the crossing of the Bering Strait, the second earliest chronological *Heritage Minute* dramatizes the Vikings briefly settling on the coast of Newfoundland a thousand years ago. Events that took place within the borders of Canada, even though the participants themselves were not Canadian have been depicted more than once in the *Minutes*. For example, one *Heritage Minute* “revisits Signal Hill in St. John's Newfoundland, on December 12, 1901, as Italian inventor Guglielmo Marconi receives the first transatlantic radio message” (www.histori.ca, 2001). What counts as part of Canadian history then, and by extension as relevant to Canadian collective memory, in the *Heritage Minutes*? Events carried

out by foreign protagonists on Canadian soil (Marconi), acts by Canadians carried out on foreign soil (the invention of basketball by Canadian James Naismith in Massachusetts), acts by people who never even heard of Canada that took place on Canadian soil-to-be (the Viking settlement), and acts by people who had never been to Canada but ruled over it all the same (a depiction of Queen Victoria discussing the concept of “responsible government” with one of her aides) are all included (Historica!, 2001). For both the *Minutes* and *A People’s History*, the advantage of casting such a wide net in terms of what they include is minimizing the extent to which these programs appear to be defining Canada, or limiting who can relate to the programs.

In fact, the emphasis on the achievements, struggles and sacrifices of diverse people in the past seems to carry a particular message. Inferred is the debt we owe the people of the past, be they of our group or not, in contributing to what is constructed as the end-goal of all these endeavours, our modern nation-state. On this point, journalist Brian Bethune of *Maclean’s* magazine writes about *A People’s History*, “The focus on ordinary people makes them – and us, their descendants – participants in an endless epic drama, one in which we see ourselves as never before” (2001). Here the dominant ideological message of Canadian unity and maintenance of the political status quo becomes clear. These productions hail the viewer into identification with those who have contributed to Canada, the nation-state, and call upon us to feel the obligation to further Canada’s “destiny,” regardless of our particular group’s relationship to those who have historically ruled and continue to rule the country. Bodnar (1992) has argued that both official and vernacular culture exist in tension with each other in public memory, but that the official interests usually have the power to incorporate the vernacular interests in a way that serves the goal of national identification. In the *Heritage Minutes* and *A People’s History*, the diverse and

dramatic stories of many people have in common their place in a larger narrative structure about Canada.

Narrative

The techniques used to ostensibly balance out the ideological impetus for creating these productions, that of minimizing the sense of mediation and emphasizing multiple perspectives, ultimately function within a meta-narrative about Canada, that inflects the significance of each representation of the past in these memory projects. Hayden White (1992) writes, “Narrative is regarded as a neutral ‘container’ of historical fact, a mode of discourse ‘naturally’ suited to representing historical events directly” (p.37). In these productions, then, the narrative of the past as a long lead-up to our modern and familiar nation-state, full of dramatic turning points where the destiny and fate of the nation hung in the balance, has a misleading appearance to viewers as “natural”.

In relation to this point, Starowicz talks about the logic behind his choice of how to tell the story of Canada, suggesting that it is just one of the possible ways to tell the story

You could do it thematically, with one episode on labour, another episode on women, another episode on ethnic groups. But we chose to do it chronologically...because the central unifying idea of Canadian history is once there was nothing here...and that’s why we chose to do it as the growth of an entire united nations of peoples. (CBC, 2000a)

Starowicz’ comments reveal his awareness that narrative is *not* a neutral container, but in fact that the choice of how to tell the story, even the apparently natural choice of chronological order, has ideological force. In this case, according to Starowicz, the chronological style of narrative serves to emphasize the essential unity of Canada.

Scholars have discussed in depth how journalistic narrative conventions, like historical conventions, can in themselves carry moral and ideological meaning. Mander (1987) argues that the practice of reporting the news presupposes a moral order, as the very choices of what stories to tell and how to tell them involves judgments about what is important, and what is right and wrong. On the moral ordering tendencies of narrative, she writes, "...any narrative account of real events must have a moral ending. A story always endows events with a significance they do not possess as a sequence or set of sequences in the order of existence" (Mander, 1987, 64). It is unsurprising then, that the narrative form of chronology, where events are conceptualized and understood in terms of their contribution to a much larger narrative about the 'story of Canada', should have its own ideological force.

To illustrate the kind of narrative frames that *Canada: A People's History* uses, consider the text from the preview clip for episode eight, "The Great Enterprise"

Against the terrifying background of the Civil War, thirty-three men must settle the fate of the Queen's colonies in British North America. It is a story of powerful personalities, and a bitter political stalemate. One man, accused of treason in his youth, has become a passionate defender of the British Crown. Another risks his life as he preaches peace. They know half a continent is theirs if they can overcome deep mutual suspicions and resist dangerous forces gathering on the border. This is a time of secret deals and a backroom intervention by the powerful. A story of risk and seduction. A gamble to build a country from sea to sea. (Starowicz, 2001a)

Here, the past is described as a series of turning points where the destiny of the nation hangs in the balance.

Despite the supposedly objective journalistic approach of the CBC documentary, this summary of episode eight essentializes the events in terms of their contributions to a larger ‘nation-building’ narrative. We learn that “it will be a story of” seduction, risk, powerful personalities, and of gambling on the future. Interestingly, the themes of more than one hundred years ago echo closely the themes encountered in contemporary ruminations on the state of the nation. Events south of the border still pose a threat to Canadian nationhood, political stalemates continue, and there are still those who gamble on maintaining the “country from sea to sea”. Canadian scholar Elspeth Cameron (1995) has commented on how the *Heritage Minutes* exhibit a similar tendency, saying “...as myth they function in the ways myth usually does, reading contemporary values both backwards onto history and forwards to articulate nationhood” (p.1).

The various ways that the producers of these programs have attempted to de-emphasize any grand narrative of Canadian history, however, have not prevented the *Minutes* and *A People's History* from being perceived as federalist propaganda by Quebec separatists. In fact, in 1999, the Quebec legislature proposed that the province make their own *Heritage Minutes*, “to counter the federal commercials” (*The Gazette*, 1999). The idea that the *Minutes* are created or paid for by the federal government is false, but the observation that the *Minutes* take the desirability of Canadian unity as a given may well be correct. Charles Bronfman, an anglophone Montrealer, has identified Canadian unity as one of the motivating forces behind the project (Cameron, 1995). Tom Axworthy, executive director of the CRB Foundation, is a former aide to federalist Prime Minister Trudeau as well as being the brother of one of Canada’s most successful Liberal politicians, former Minister of Foreign Affairs Lloyd Axworthy. The usual suspects of federalism, then, do have their fingers in the *Heritage Minute* pie. And it is certainly in the

CBC's self-interest, as a television network mandated through tax dollars to serve the whole country, to support the political structures that make its continued existence possible.

Both productions have taken the idea of telling interesting stories to Canadians about their past as their structure. With emphases on human interest, faithfulness to the "facts," and inclusion, this strategy has resulted in engaging productions that, to their credit, depict moments of dissent and injustice as well as celebrating Canadian progress and innovation. However, the larger nation-building narrative within which different historical moments are depicted serves as a frame that implicitly provides a template for evaluating the significance and contribution of these actors and events.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has tracked how cultural products that explicitly go about bolstering national identity through collective memory must negotiate the dangers of appearing too propagandistic, particularly in a Canadian context. These projects grapple with the tensions in the idea, so commonly found in groups of many kinds, that diversity can exist within unity, that we can be different and yet also somehow the same, that we can disagree yet ultimately come to consensus. The makers of these memory projects attempt to distance themselves from the ideological goals of their productions through the techniques I have outlined here, apparently in the hope that ideas of diversity and unity will lie quietly side by side. By including multiple perspectives, these programs nod in the direction of diversity and difference, but could also be accused of trying to co-opt positions opposing Canadian federalism. Through their depictions of the stories of the disaffected as episodes in the story of Canada, and the presentation of past rebellions and conflicts as part of the "human condition," there is a way in which these programs

may de-politicize the past. As much as the viewer might feel, while viewing the *Heritage Minutes* and *Canada: A People's History*, that one is experiencing the past in a relatively unmediated manner, unavoidably the presentation of events and personalities fits into a larger narrative that traces the past in terms of how it contributed to its assumed end-point, the contemporary nation-state.

An examination of the *Minutes* and *A People's History* suggests that a memory project that attempts to promote collective memory while simultaneously celebrating diversity faces challenges for which there are no easy solutions. These *lieux de mémoires* legitimate and privilege the collective “we” of Canadians over the “groups within the group” model by their very decision to promote Canadian history, and unsurprisingly, those with the interest to create these memory projects have a unity agenda that can be effaced, but never eliminated. Although these programs admirably provide a diverse and multi-perspectival representation of the past, and do not shy away from depicting many of the dissenters and rebels of Canadian history, it seems that collective memory continues to not just use the past in the service of present aims, but, using Bodnar’s vocabulary, use the stories of the vernacular in the service of official aims.

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