

Country music and cultural industry: mediating structures in transnational media flow

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Rita's music is a music of hope, it's a music of overcoming problems, and it's a music of joy. And people everywhere in the world will relate to that.

– Lyman MacInnis, Managing Director, Balmur Management Ltd.

Appropriately enough, my first encounter with country music was while driving with my father. Navigating highways and back roads, en route to my hockey games, all we could agree on for music was a Richmond Hill, Ontario AM country radio station – literally, middle of the road. Growing up in Toronto, I thought of this as a quintessentially Canadian experience. In a way, it was: over time, the interlocking spaces of automobile, country music, and highway which connected home and arena melded together, and our twice-weekly drives became an in-between space that could only have been produced inside an imagined national culture. The music, the open road, the hockey equipment in the trunk, a boy and his father – we were well on our way to discovering the essence of Canadian-ness, I was certain. That certainty faded one Sunday on the way to team practice, though. Blaring from the radio that day was Stompin' Tom in what the disk jockey was calling the weekly Canadian Hour. I remember thinking, stunned, 'what on Earth had they been playing the rest of the week?'

The same moment of cognitive dissonance returned when, flipping channels years later on late-night television, I stumbled upon an infomercial for Rita MacNeil, of all people. My surprise this time sprung from MacNeil's status as a well-respected and well-known entertainer in Canada, a reason for and result of her Juno and Canadian Country Music Association awards, her television specials and programme, and a host of other honours. I had always thought of infomercials as the exclusive terrain of power weight-loss methods and car shine, automatic hair trimmers and

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home fitness kits. To my mind, the infomercial was what languished, with the home shopping network, at the bottom of the barrel of the lowest of 'low culture'. This was 'trash TV', where products nobody had ever heard of screamed out directly to home viewers, begging to be purchased. Given both her critical success and the respect she commands, Rita MacNeil was the last person I expected to see flogging her wares on my television screen. Nor was my surprise lessened by the later realization that I *had* seen something similar before: a commercial for a Stompin' Tom Connors compilation – *Proud To Be Canadian*.

What was common to the infomercial and the commercial, of course, was that they stood simultaneously inside and outside country music. Both televisual texts were selling country music, and yet the music they were selling was *not quite* country: the performances had all the trappings, to be sure, but the sounds didn't quite fit, just as they hadn't quite fitted on that country radio station long ago. It's this *not quite* that this article interrogates, then, because it reveals much about the institutional sites through which cultural industry is articulated. What does it mean to talk, no longer of country music, but of *Canadian* country music? How is this Canadian country music inscribed in the tension between local and global, and how is it complicit with particular constructions of national identity? Popular music is, after all, a transnational industry whose commercial practices have national boundaries to deal with. This back-and-forth between the transnational genre's deployment in Canada (Canadian 'country music') and its mobilization as a distinct industrial space for circulating music ('Canadian country music') is at the heart of our inquiry here.

Buying air time on television is an institutional short cut. It bypasses other, more usual channels of circulation and other, more dominant discursive formations: radio airplay and television airplay and hit charts for country music, other forms of advertising and media attention and a certain cultural familiarity ('Have you been going to Weight Watchers?') for power weight-loss methods, and so on. The infomercial that Rita MacNeil used to sell her music to Canadians, and *that* she used one, was in this sense a decisive intervention into the field of Canadian country music. It demonstrated how Canadian cultural producers must route their product through the complex web of institutions which comprise cultural industries – here, the transnational flow of popular music – and, ultimately, the market-bound institutional locations in which cultural production takes place. For MacNeil and other Maritime performers, this has often meant being recast as country musicians, part of 'the too-familiar predicament Maritime artists find themselves in and many have complained of: their music is fine, even outstanding, but what is it – country, pop, adult contemporary, roots, traditional?' (Beaton and Pederson, 1992: 170).

What happens to country music, that global signifier of Americanness, when it is in another country? This is a question in two parts. The first

involves cobbling together a useable music genre out of various local musics and a transnationally circulating music called country. The second part involves feeding this genre back through specific circuits of popular music contiguous with national borders. At bottom, then, our inquiry is into the space in which national culture is produced: into how culture in the national context is always a product of particular practices anchored in the institutions (businesses, organizations, agencies; privately-run, state-run, 'public') that overlay national space but that extend beyond borders and over other spaces and places; into how the local is interpellated into this transnational configuration of institutions; and into how this interpellation of Canadian cultural producers resigns them to a marginal role in a larger industry. That means thinking about a given country such as 'Canada', not as a difference-subsuming identitary formation, but rather as precisely the governmental space that Jody Berland talks about when she notes that

[w]hether Canadian culture can be identified as a unitary 'national subject' in this picture is of little theoretical interest to a community of musicians and cultural producers who recognise a working oppression which affects them and which they discuss, in contexts related to music-industry issues, in terms of their Canadian nationality. (1991: 324)

Music, then, can be said to function as a *mediation* of nationhood. It is not the simple effect of some transcendent national identity, any more than nationhood is an effect of music – though this last may be a tempting analysis of the country at hand since, as Andrew Murphie notes:

Many wonder what the planetary means any more – if being the formed citizen of any State, with a capital S, or even a more regular state such as a particular sexuality, no matter how enlightened, is desirable or even possible. Such spaces and states seem increasingly determined by rapidly shifting social and technological milieus which are out of our control. . . . Popular music may turn out to be more than just a barometer of this changing attitude to space. It may also be producing it. (1996: 18)

It is here, produced inside and productive of a Canadian country, that I want to situate the Rita MacNeil infomercial I saw on television that night: a discursive trace of extradiscursive processes, an orbit in the constellation of popular music genres inside Canadian space.

Late night with Rita MacNeil

Significantly, the infomercial was originally produced for and run on US television. It was the unusual volume of orders placed by Canadians watching the original infomercial on cross-border television that triggered the decision to rebroadcast the infomercial in slightly modified version for

the much smaller Canadian market. As Canadians watch the infomercial, then, a production encoded to interpellate American subjectivities is recirculated on Canadian television and in Canadian homes. In particular, it is the omnipresent country music sensibility that marks the infomercial: Rita MacNeil's music is being sold as country music in terms of its affective states and meanings, through its style – not in terms of its reproduction of the sounds of country music. The music we hear on the infomercial hardly sounds like country music, and yet it is precisely Rita's 'country'-ness that is the infomercial's selling point.

Writing about what he calls the 'ideology of folk' and the value of *authenticity* in music (1982, 1991), Simon Frith refers to the notion 'that folk music was a music made directly, spontaneously, by the rural communities themselves; it was the music of working people and expressed their communal experience of work. . . . Folk songs – "real, raw, rank and file music" – are a direct contrast to pop songs – bland, escapist, artificial, produced only for the money' (1982: 160). This concern with authenticity is at the heart of country music sensibilities. Thus, the infomercial starts with a clip of Garth Brooks, one of country music's biggest stars, at the Canadian Country Music Awards, explaining that country music's greatest asset is that it is *real* – stitching together Rita MacNeil, authenticity, and country music. As the 30-minute infomercial continues, the 'ideology of folk' and its construction of 'the people' and working life are hammered home in a number of ways: interviews with 'working people' jostle with accounts of Rita's working-class past and her battle against adversity (her handicaps of a cleft palate, shyness, a 'weight problem', and a working-class background are enumerated on more than one occasion). Shots of Rita's Tea Room, a tea room where Rita can meet personally with her fans, because 'the tea is always on in Cape Breton', are followed by her daughter's revelation that Rita's first concern when she returns from a tour is her mail, because she answers 'ninety-nine percent of her mail' herself (including that of soldiers in the Gulf War, we learn). The male off-camera announcer's reassuring voice offers us a free video when we order the double album as 'Rita's gift to you', and a key sequence unfolds in which we are shown Rita MacNeil's 'most memorable night' – when she performed her song about coal miners, 'Working Man', with The Men of the Deeps, a 'choir made up of *real* coal miners'. As Canadian musician Chuck Angus puts it, 'To be successful in country you have to convince your audience that underneath all the rhinestone and tack you're as simple and ordinary as they are. This is where the music finds its real profundity' (1993: 15). Through her infomercial, Rita MacNeil is presented as a country star, both 'ordinary and extraordinary' (Ellis, 1982: 97).

Indeed, from beginning to end, the infomercial's task is to present Rita MacNeil not simply as a country singer, but as someone who is part of the country *world*. Popular music is a transnational industry; it is produced and

reproduced, distributed and consumed inside a complex structured alliance of industrial and governmental institutions which make use of *genres* to establish market distinctions through which their products can be sold. MacNeil's infomercial, then, articulates her to the country genre through sensibility, and not sound: in 'fitting' her music into transnational popular music, music ends up playing second fiddle. What I am suggesting here, then, is that if the cultural production of popular music is shaped by the institutions in which it is produced, it is not only music that is being shaped, and sometimes hardly music at all. This means moving beyond understanding popular music as an industrialized process, to understanding it as also part of a larger process in which popular culture itself is constantly circulating and being struggled over, within and across borders. If Americans and Canadians are able to 'fit' the taste formations articulated in the infomercial with country music, it is the result of decades of country music's embeddedness in American popular culture and its audiences – in movies, novels, magazines, and, yes, music, among many others.

If the Rita MacNeil infomercial presents a resolutely country Rita, though, to Canadian viewers something is absent – the 'Canada' in Rita. In Canada, Rita MacNeil has very much been constructed as a figure of 'Canadianness', and specifically a Cape Breton Maritimer; her Order of Canada award, honorary university degrees, and above all, high visibility on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (Christmas specials for several years and, from 1994 through 1997, her own weekly musical variety show) bear witness to that. Indeed, for one Australian critic she is transformed into a sort of transcendental signifier for Canada: 'part of Canada can be found in Rita's music, which is part of her attraction: Canadians are fiercely obstinate, fellow battlers and survivors, intensely committed to lack of compromise and unswerving integrity' (Passa, 1992). Rather than take this assertion as reassurance that outside the United States Rita doesn't have to 'be country' and is recognized for some essential Canadianness, though, we might rather look to how the Australian critic's characterization of Canadianness mirrors the characteristics usually ascribed to country music in the first place – lack of compromise, unswerving integrity, *authentic* – and realize that, like generic distinctions, the 'Canadianness' which an Australian music critic heard in Rita MacNeil is produced *within* the space of the transnational. 'Canada' becomes a distinguishing signifier which circulates and acquires value *inside* the world market: analogous (but not identical) to the infomercial's mobilization of Rita MacNeil's 'Cape Breton-ness' or 'Maritimeness'. Simon Frith characterizes this transnational-local relationship:

In this context the 'local' is defined by reference not to a specific geography or community but, rather, to a shared sense of place that is, itself, part of the global picture. In such a mapping process, one's sense of musical locality depends both on the immediate material circumstances (venues, audiences, etc.)

and also on 'reference' groups, on identities and fantasies that are themselves mediated globally. 'Locality' is produced as our sense of difference from the global – it is not a spontaneous expression of given, hard-held local traditions. (1991: 268)

Frith's account is useful in his conception of the local as something musicians and fans try to articulate against and through transnationally circulating genres; at the same time, though, we have to be careful to preserve the specificity of *country* music within his formulation. That is, country music's privileging of notions of 'folk' and 'rural' has always accorded it a close relationship with folk and traditional musics – exactly those 'given, hard-held local traditions' – producing hybrid local musics which mediate between country-as-transnational-genre and traditional-as-local-genre: thus, regional countries and 'countrified' folks (Roberts, 1978; Rosenberg, 1974). Rita MacNeil, in particular, is an example of this tension between the local and the transnational that marks the contested terrain of Canadian country music. The infomercial demonstrates this eloquently by mobilizing the 'local' of Cape Breton as a marker of authenticity to link Rita with the transnational genre through which, she hopes, Americans and Canadians will buy her music – country music. Indeed, what we *didn't* see in the infomercial – the 'Canadianness' that Rita stands for around the world and in Canadian living rooms – might seem to jibe with the ever-popular suspicion that nations are quietly withering away, that in the global marketplace signifiers of nationhood slip furtively away.

If that means that the nation is no longer the unquestioned pole of identity around which we all rally then it's hard to disagree. The field of culture in which national identities are constituted has always been criss-crossed by other identitary projects which take up gender, ethnicity, class and a myriad of other categories, and so if these seem to be commanding a greater pull than some nations these days, then perhaps the nation *is* wasting away. But by connecting Rita MacNeil and her infomercial with the institutional alignment of that piece of the national-popular called 'Canadian country music', I think we can tease out other, more useful ways to think of the nation. I am, then, referring to the ensemble of state and industrial institutions which work through genre to articulate popular music produced within Canadian space to Canadians as 'Canadian country music', and which are intimately linked to the larger transnational popular music genre of 'country music'. Rita MacNeil's infomercial demonstrates how those whose music is articulated as 'Canadian country music' are involved in a struggle between the local and the transnational – between the kinds of music they make and the kinds of music that will 'fit' with the institutional logics of transnational music industry.

Canadian musicians and music producers strive, then, to refigure popular music genres as terrains of contestation which not only structure but also are structured *by* musicians and music producers. But their effort is

overshadowed by another, more heavily foregrounded tension which exists *within* the transnational, over how country music is defined. This tension circulates inside the genre, across, between and through borders, embedded in the institutions which dominate and articulate country music itself – major record companies, charts, music radio and television, and so forth.

Such an argument requires problematizing. For example, a 1986 Canadian Radiotelevision and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) report on the state of country music in Canada, which was written in response to requests on the part of radio broadcasters to lower Canadian content requirements. The report came up with a scant sentence on the relationship between country music production in the United States and in Canada: '[t]he history of Canadian country music . . . *generally parallels* that of country music in the United States' (author's emphasis). Thus, after a 'history of country music in North America', the 'history of Canadian country music' is unproblematically launched into as its analogous and integrated northern cousin. The transnational circulation in popular music genres, in other words, is part of the common sense of the CRTC's formulation of popular music. Such a formulation might seem surprising, coming from a state institution whose very existence revolves around the articulation of 'Canada' as national space and the (re)production of difference between that and other, similarly-produced national spaces. If anything, though, this way of formulating popular music should remind us of cultural policy's back-and-forth of nationalist and national-industrialist objectives. Still, why should the two country music genres be referred to as 'parallel' histories at all? Perhaps, rather than the histories of two separate 'national genres', Canadian country music is embedded in the country music of the United States itself. Perhaps it is a question of the degrees of fit and accommodations between music made by Canadians and the industrial genre of country music – not the simultaneous springing up of analogous popular music genres. And perhaps it is here that state policy might position itself: as strategic intervention into the industrialized terrain of popular music, on behalf of the musicians and cultural producers who inhabit Canadian space.

This would be an intervention into a 'parallel history' that is not parallel at all, a space of global power plays and of face-offs between oppositional logics. I want to explore this by locating two specific conjunctures in this 'parallel history' which demonstrate how the generic codes and sensibilities of country music are articulated within the transnational. The second of these will be the 'challenge' posed to the genre that came with country music's subdivision into traditional and new country – a struggle which not only played out in Canada, but whose contours shape the apparatus through which musical production, circulation, and consumption take place in the national, or country, context. First, however, we must understand country music's initial industrialization as popular music genre.

Wish Upon a (Shootin') Star

Country music first came into being in the 1920s, when record companies recorded and distributed folk music from the southern USA for consumption, and when a then newfangled technology called 'radio' began to broadcast this music live and, later, from recordings. It was around this time, therefore, that country music would be codified as a popular music genre, with its own textual codes and its own sensibilities, articulated discursively within specific social formations and by specific institutions, radio stations and record companies among them.

Hillbilly music, as early country music was known, emerged from the Anglo-Celtic heritage, agricultural/rural way of life and practice of slavery which were part of the isolated mode of existence of southern Euro-Americans (Malone, 1985; Rosenberg, 1979). This was just one regional folk tradition among hundreds which existed in the United States and its borderlands, however. If a particular folk music became hillbilly music, it was precisely because of institutions like record companies and radio stations, or (as we have come to call the complex and shifting alliance between record companies, radio stations and other institutions of popular music) the music industry, which took up this southern folk music in a specific manner and reshaped it into popular music. Each of the hundreds of regional folk musics of the European settlers and colonizers of North America experienced complex relations of production, circulation, and consumption which determined and rearticulated their forms. That one of these folk musics was taken up by the music industry – moving it from a primarily *interpersonal* form of articulation to a primarily *institutional* one – meant not only its interpellation into the commercial and industrial sphere, but that that particular folk music would become the basis for country music. As a genre of popular music, it would be produced within certain 'rules' and 'norms', certain codes and conventions, and certain sensibilities, and consumed within certain 'systems of expectation and hypothesis'. After all, as Steve Neale points out, popular culture needs to be articulated into genre, 'ruled as it is by market pressures to differentiate to a limited degree in order to cater to various sectors of consumers, and to repeat commercially successful patterns' (1990: 63). One local, then, was discursively articulated into the transnational form.

It was at this point that the local and the transnational could enter into relations, and they did so with gusto: country music proved to be popular with similar 'folk' formations all over the United States and Canada, particularly in the Maritimes and parts of Ontario and British Columbia (Green, 1988), and thus struck a responsive chord through the shared Anglo-Celtic tradition of the music (Malone, 1985). As one folklorist explains, discussing folk music in New York State, 'tradition-oriented

people outside the South bought commercially recorded Southern music because it was the closest available approximation to their musical tradition' (Roberts, 1978: 23). The popularity of country music in Canada rose quickly through phonograph record sales (in the early 1920s) and especially through radio (Green and Miller, 1992), and the success of country music led a Toronto music publisher to look for a Canadian version of Jimmie Rodgers, the 'father of country modern music'. The publisher found Nova Scotian Wilf Carter yodelling in a bar in Calgary – Rodgers had brought yodelling into country music after hearing a touring group of Tyrolean singers – and, before long, Wilf Carter and Hank Snow, another Nova Scotian, were part of country music's star system in the United States. It is important to observe here the relationship of musicians in Canada to country music's transnational: as Marquis (1988) notes, 'Snow, who became a patriotic American citizen and part of the Nashville establishment, came to symbolize the dream and dilemma of the ambitious Canadian country singer' – dream, of the ascent to country music stardom; dilemma, because the location of stardom was always south. If a booming Canadian country music industry developed and has continued to develop since then, it would always play the role of hinterland to the USA's and especially Nashville's centre. An article in the trade journal *Canadian Musician* aimed at helping Canadian musicians navigate Nashville's centre is instructive in this regard (Kennedy, 1993: 53): '[T]hese days (once you get yourself headed in the right direction), you're likely to pull up beside an Ontario license plate as you stop for a light along Broadway, just like I did. . . . You know, it *almost* seemed completely normal.'

If Canadian country is peripheral to the industrial hubs of country's transnational, then, its textual and aesthetic dilemmas are always to be resolved in reference to what is produced in and through these hubs. The ongoing transnationalization of music has served less to incorporate other locales into country music than to delocalize the transnational: Hollywood's 'singing cowboy' films of the 1930s, for instance, which adapted country music for urban audiences – changing country music in the process – were located exactly inside the genre's industrial transnational.

This does not render 'country music' as a static, narrowly-defined genre. On the contrary: as Malone (1985) shows, the very mainstream of country music has always been a dynamic, changing one, incorporating wide-ranging influences from a variety of regions (albeit mostly southern US ones). Similarly, it would be incorrect to collapse 'country music' and 'United States' into some celebration of the nation-state form, with Canada as far-away other: inhabitants of the state of New York, as just one example (Roberts, 1978), have stood in a similar local-(trans)national tension with country music. But it is precisely Canada's status *as* country – as both reason for and target of a state machinery – which renders such

national distinctions relevant, because it points to the capacity of government to intervene into existing arrangements, '[s]hifting the policy emphasis from cultural production to [include] networks of distribution and points of consumption' which 'would arguably foster a more active relationship between creators and users of cultural products' (Raboy et al., 1994: 52–3). Here, the governmental space of the country is figured as a space of relative autonomy for cultural producers by including among its range of interventions the discursive formations in which value and taste formations – what kind of musics constitute country music, or what kind of music constitutes good music – are produced in popular music, even as the cultural practices which inhabit this space are understood to be profoundly imbricated in the transnational, both affectively and meaningfully.

Such interventions are meaningful only because country was always defined *within* industrial and *within* transnational spaces, not outside them. When country music shifted – as it did in the 1930s with singing cowboy films, as it did in the 1940s when a recording strike allowed the small labels putting out country music to demonstrate its profitability, and so on – shifts were taking place within the industrial composition of the music industry, and indeed within the larger relationships between the entertainment industries. Altering the parameters of the genres through which popular music gets heard has never been possible without engaging with it at this transnational level.

Radio days

The second conjuncture I want to look at in country music's history as popular music genre is the moment of its splitting in two sub-genres, 'new country' and 'traditional country', both of which have been engaged in a struggle over the definition of country music ever since. This moment was rooted in the 1959 founding of the Country Music Association (CMA) as an industry lobby group to promote country music as good, wholesome, *family* entertainment. The lobby group's mission was therefore to re-articulate country – which had up to then been tied up in values of rurality, tradition, authenticity, and so on – with notions of modernity and hence urbanity: where, in other words, the major markets lay. As Richard A. Peterson (1978) recounts, the CMA was extremely effective in repositioning country within the music industry. Its mission was precisely one of reconnecting country music to other signifieds, of reinvesting it with new meaning in the minds not only of consumers but also, and more immediately, with other players within the industry, and especially radio stations. From an advertising agency's pitch on behalf of the CMA:

Today the term *country* is synonymous with *nation*. Other than jazz, this form is the only truly 'national' music of the United States – telling in lyrics the stories of people, places, experience, and feelings.

It is called by many names to connote this 'national' feeling – Americana, country-politan, town and country, etc. In any event, *modern* country music has no relationship to rural or mountain life. It is the music of this *Nation*, of this country, the music of the people. You find no screech fiddle, no twangy guitars, no mournful nasal twangs in the *modern* Nashville sound of country music. Today you find the sweeping sound of full orchestrations, multi-voiced choruses, amplified instruments and sophisticated arrangements, and an adult lyric approach.

Consequently, the *modern* country-music station is as bright, urbane, sophisticated and lively as the best contemporary MOR or better-music station with wide adult appeal. The winning country music stations are, first, good radio stations, regardless of the music they play. (Alan Torbet Radio Consultants, in Peterson, 1978: 302)

The endeavour sought to rearticulate country music across the high-low boundary while retaining its populist appeal, taking it from country's familiar position in American popular culture as 'low culture' to the 'bright, urbane, sophisticated' and, above all, 'modern'-ness of the high, rendering it more saleable and more profitable. Significantly, this conjugation of country music with 'nation' and 'family' would also operate as an articulation with right-wing political movements, much the same way that rock-and-roll would be (Grossberg, 1992), and, of course, this period was particularly one in which a great deal of 'crossover' between country and rock music began to take place. For the first time, both textually and in terms of sensibility, country and rock 'fitted' together, both on the political right *and* left, with the rearticulation of folk into popular music.

Meanwhile, the country radio industry was exploding and, by extension, shifting as part of the great success of the CMA's campaign. Country music, radio stations were discovering, could be a profitable format indeed. Whereas country music radio had, in the past, been largely run by fans and performers of country music whose announcing styles were closer to the rhythms of everyday speech, country radio now became another genre of popular radio. Workers at many radio stations which had just switched over to country were unfamiliar with the conventions of country music, and instead transferred pop sensibilities over to this new format: a 'fast-paced, bright' announcing style, a short playlist (to give people 'the hits they want') and, generally, an effort to reach a more affluent audience. The code words of this new country music were 'contemporary', 'gentle', 'new breed', 'progressive', and 'mellow' (Peterson, 1978).

Music is not simply a cultural construct to be articulated and re-articulated, though. On one end, producers mobilize 'ranges of structures, processes, and textures' which are carried within the sounds of music. On the other, consumers don't simply use music as a source of meaning; they also, and perhaps more importantly, invest affectively in music (Shepherd,

1993). Among those affected most by country music's repositioning were thus the country performers rooted in its earlier moment: as producers and consumers of this music, they felt a deep attachment to country music as they knew it, both in the sensibility of country and its sound and meanings. Recognizing the substantial place of the institutional in articulating the discourses which surround and help place country music, about 50 well-known country musicians formed in 1974 the Academy of Country Entertainers to wage a war of position with the CMA, after the annual CMA awards had given four of its top awards 'to persons whom many at the meeting did not consider "country music" artists':

The original purpose of the new organization was to establish a definition of country music that would exclude the cultural carpetbaggers coming from the field of popular music, but it was not universally welcomed. Many people in the music industry dismissed the new organization as an attempt of fading stars to stand in the way of changes taking place in the music in a vain effort to prolong their own careers. (Peterson, 1978: 292–3)

What would come out of this struggle would be the fracturing of country between 'new country' and 'traditional country', and continued attempts to accomplish a totalizing articulation of country music *as transnational genre*. This struggle circulates within transnational industry as part of country music. In Toronto, north of the border, CISS-FM was inaugurated as a new country station drawing one of the largest audience shares of country stations anywhere in North America (Davis, 1993). It is worthwhile examining a lengthy quote from an interview given by Doug Pringle, director of programming for CISS's owner, Rawlco Communications, because the interview neatly captures how not only the sound, but also the *sensibility* of new country is reinjected into another national context. Pringle talks about country as 'the mass appeal pop music of the '90s, the new music for baby boomers' which 'gives voice to the concerns of our generation, like all major musical trends':

— Start with the British invasion of rock 'n' roll. It spoke for a young, cocky, anti-establishment attitude among teenagers of the early 60's. The next trend came when drugs met Vietnam and we witnessed the birth of the counterculture. Hendrix, the Doors, Led Zeppelin, Jefferson Airplane – these guys expressed the introspection and expansion of the consciousness brought on by hippie culture and drugs. The 70's? The decade of consolidation. A time when we and the artists who spoke for us tried to make sense of all the turmoil and rebellion of the 60's. Don't forget our generation *expects* music to stimulate and move us, to talk to us. The fact is that since big stars such as Pink Floyd, Supertramp and The Eagles, we've lacked a musical voice. Oh, there were the occasional hits from Springsteen and Sting, but the era of plenty dried up. Even the punk and new wave stuff failed to make it big in North America. The real reason? Adolescents here had significantly more than their English counterparts. They weren't hungry enough to be violent. Another antimelody trend, rap, which is a vitally passionate music, also failed to sweep the country because it didn't speak to the population bulge, the boomers.

— *What is new country music saying that we like so much?*

— Simply put, it's music for grown-ups. I mean, look at Madonna. She's big, but she's *weird*. Michael Jackson? He's big, but *he's* weird. (Hampson, 1993: 63)

Pringle continues, noting that new country music offers 'scope, intelligence, and literacy', not least because top new country stars tend to have high levels of education (63). The response to criticism for 'serving up a highly commercial form of country' is that CISS has no other choice – 'we feel the country and western tradition of twang and fiddles is not sophisticated enough for mass appeal' (63–4).

Pringle reveals much of the CMA's rearticulation of country music. The Alan Torbet advertising pitch finds its echo in Pringle's words, and especially, we are struck by the reproduction of the high/low dichotomy in Pringle's characterization of the varying degrees of sophistication between the two articulations of country music. This dichotomy is reinforced in places like trade magazine *Broadcaster*, where an article on new country radio in Canada quotes radio consultant Pat Bohn as stating that '[b]roadcasting new country music on AM would be like seeing MuchMusic in black and white' (Davis, 1993: 12). These are the traces of a struggle to rework country music as an urbane genre without giving up its identity as country, an articulation which draws much from folk and roots music. Listen, for example, to the editor of British magazine *Folk Roots* who 'sees folk as "non-commercial musics", consumed by "people who aren't willing to be spoon-fed something that the music biz has concocted; dare I say it . . . a more *intelligent* audience who will pick up on the integrity of music that comes straight from the heart"' (Redhead and Street, 1989: 179). New country locates itself within this space of authenticity, but also as part of the larger evolution of the baby boom: intelligent, sophisticated, and with qualms about selling out left behind long ago. Here is the struggle over the right to the title of country music, then, played out in the space of Canadian country music.

That such a debate should take place in Canada's largest commercial music market demonstrates how, after 70 years of country music, the country genre is firmly ensconced in what Mark Fenster suggests is '[t]he majors' goal', to 'produce a universal space of musical production and consumption, which includes local, regional and national musical practices, and that does not disrupt and is linked to the flow of copyrights, licenses and capitals that the majors control. In bumper sticker logo: act globally, think locally' (1995: 86). Country music is a genre whose encoding is played out in the institutions of transnational industry, far away from the concerns of local cultural producers, and yet it is country music which serves as the generic structure for local cultural production – institutionally,

even affectively – of a wide variety of music in Canada. It is to the interplay between these two processes that we now return.

The country in Canada

Writing on the ‘Internationalization of the US Music Industry and its Impact on Canada’ (1991), Reebee Garofalo observes that

[u]nlike, say, film or video, popular music is seldom exported as a finished product. What gets exported most often are master tapes which require the development of a whole production and distribution infrastructure within the host country. This process plays some role in building the local economy. But, more importantly, in order to operate cost effectively, the local production facilities are also utilized for the production of local musics. There is, thus, an interaction between US pop and local musics which isn’t found in the exportation of other mass cultural forms. (328)

Such an interaction, in other words, depends on the way the industrial structures which accompany transnational music flows articulate local musics. In the complex woven networks of country music in Canada – and their various and varied institutions, including radio stations, record companies, awards shows, industry associations, television, etc. – the Canadian music that is circulated and rearticulated derives from various musical styles, which run the gamut between the tensions of the transnational and the local, but in which those approaching the sound of transnational ‘country music’ have long been privileged. This can be understood only by recognizing the intricate alliance of industrial and governmental institutions which, as the music and entertainment industries, actively reproduce musical culture as cultural industry – and, hence, as part of the transnational flows of both capital and music.

Thus, for example, country music radio, whose Canadian presence on the FM band is regulated by the CRTC. The CRTC’s 1975 Radio Policy set the tone for Canada’s music industry by dividing FM popular music radio into four distinct formats borrowed from US market research specialists: softer music, rock, country music, and other kinds of popular music (folk-oriented, jazz-oriented, etc.). The rationale behind the policy was to ‘allow for the expansion of audiences as well as for the rationalization of a rapidly growing corporate radio industry. Format could also provide and ensure a musical diversity that would answer the needs of the diversified social communities in Canada’ (Grenier, 1990: 222). As Grenier points out, though, such a rationale ignores radio’s role in the construction of taste and mapping of taste onto similarly-constructed social groups; rather, it assumes already-existing musical taste groups which map directly onto social communities, and constructs diversity as the opportunity for each social/taste group to listen to the kind of music it likes. The FM radio

policy was seen as 'something that could allow the broadcasting system to express even better pan-Canadian national characteristics as well as regional specificities' (223). If anything, though, its privileging of industrial over music scene concerns helped it to 'fit' within the transnational music industry as it, too, adopts the formats from which *Billboard* writes its weekly copy, and it is perhaps significant that the country format, in the CRTC's definition, 'ranges from "country and western" and "bluegrass" to "Nashville" and "country-pop" styles and other music forms generally characterized as country' (1984: ii–iii).

This evolution of the CRTC's FM radio policy is just one of the institutional sites which articulate and organize the sounds of music in Canada. Others include television shows like the now-defunct Tommy Hunter Show, Canada's most successful country show (where Mississauga native Hunter actually speaks with a Southern drawl, as Marquis [1988] has observed), or Country Music Television, the joint Canadian-American station formerly known as the New Country Network. Awards ceremonies held by the Canadian Country Music Association and *RPM*, among others; magazines like the *Country Music News*, whose own textual codes, rooted in country sensibilities, culminate in the Ponderosa-style lettering of the masthead; and countless others round out the institutional map of Canadian country. The Canadian country music apparatus is itself a branch plant of transnational country music.

To think about national culture, to engage with both cultural production and consumption, is necessarily to engage both with the web of institutions which articulates this 'Canadian culture' – what Gramsci called the national-popular (cf. Forgacs, 1993) – and with the articulations themselves, which are the texts and traces of cultural production. That means understanding national culture as a subset of larger processes bound up in the transnational field, recognizable as a distinct element of the superset because specified by the governance of the Canadian state. What we call 'culture' is always articulated institutionally, always located, and the institutions through which cultural production is articulated in Canada are industrialized: they don't live in a closed economy that stops at Canadian borders. The nation, in such a schema, is very simply the site of a State apparatus whose goal is to ensure a space in which cultural producers' relationships with institutions are not only structured but also structuring – to intervene, in other words, in the play of affect and produced taste which characterize culture's production, consumption, and the circuit which binds them.

Rita MacNeil's achievement of a position of certain magnitude within Canadian country (and that it is through 'Canadian country' that this magnitude was achieved) stands for the contradictions with which the music industry is shot through. It is the interaction of private and State broadcasting which has allowed MacNeil to be taken up as Canadian hero,

illustrating how wide the net of Canadian country music is cast. There is nothing pre-given or inevitable about the articulation of a country sensibility with Rita MacNeil – as music which, as Charles Conrad puts it, ‘appeals to people who may or may not be members of a demographic working class but who identify themselves as working stiffs or, indirectly, as not pointy-headed intellectuals’ (1988: 185). If, in the 30-minute spot I saw that summer evening, she *can* be constructed as ‘country’ through linkages with the notions of authenticity, of working-class-ness, of family,¹ of community, that is part of a complex interaction between her presence in the Canadian music industry and the space of the American market she hopes to crack. That her articulation as country singer may be judged an effective marketing strategy makes explicit the transnational circulation, not only of music genres, but of what Neale (1990: 49) calls ‘generic images’. These are intertextual anchors and references whose circulation is intimately related not only to the workings of the Canadian country music apparatus which we have mapped out, but also to the larger audiovisual flow which wends its way across borders. This flow, of course, constitutes the ‘always-already’ of the field of culture in Canada; Berland captures it handily in writing that ‘colonization through domination of communication media is an older problem for Canada than for most other constituencies now enjoying its effects. . . . Aside from aboriginal cultures, Canada possesses no originary identity independent of such effects’ (1991: 317). Cultural production in Canada is always embedded in the imagined spaces of the transnational and the global. It is not a matter of reclaiming an imagined purity of indigenous Canadian musical forms sullied by the powerful regimes of the music industry. It *is* a matter of thinking through the relations of power that obtain through the spaces of cultural production in which music and musicians alike come into being.

Canadian country is on contested ground, balanced precariously at a place where the lines of industry which carve out global pop music intersect with lines of state which carve out national territory. Rita’s infomercial demonstrates how those whose music is articulated through ‘country music’ are involved in a struggle between the local and the transnational, between the music they make and that music’s capacity to fit with the institutional logics of transnational music industry – which, in turn, occupies pride of place in the music that they listen to, listening habits that feed right back into the making of music. Inside this endlessly cycling process, articulating a ‘Canadian country music’ inside the space of the transnational can act as a strategic intervention, a recognition that inside Canadian space exist various local practices which do include Anglo-Celtic-based folk and traditional musics. When Canadian country music is positioned at the collision of state and industry, as a *mediating structure* between the local and the transnational, new nodal points at the convergences of lines of force are introduced into the asymmetric relations

between cultural producers and the institutions through which their products are articulated. In this way the odds for a space for people to make their own culture are improved; it is the difference between what Henri Lefebvre (1991) calls the production of things in space, and the production of space.

In recent years, Canadian folk and country musics have made new inroads, both home and away. While some of these are an easy fit – country superstar Shania Twain, for example, the Timmins, Ontario ‘Canadian native [who] gravitate[d] towards Nashville and country music’ (Polygram, n.d.) – others are able to situate themselves in a Canadian country music in which, as a Maclean-Hunter-published magazine entitled *Canada’s Hot New Country Stars* holds in an editorial entitled ‘Open Borders’,

[a] wide variety of Canadian east coast artists have been influenced more directly by the same [Celtic] music – and they didn’t have to go overseas to learn about their roots. Musicians like The Rankin Family, Rita MacNeil, Ron Hynes, Ashley MacIsaac, Kim Stockwood, The Barra MacNeils and The Irish Descendants have always been aware of them. They’re also quick to acknowledge that their music has found a place under the banner of New Country. They’re not the only ones. A variety of artists throughout our nation have found how inclusive New Country has become. For instance, Inuit singer/songwriter Susan Aglukark, country/rock group Blue Rodeo and singer/songwriter Lennie Gallant are hardly peas in a pod musically, but they’re all finding ready acceptance in a form that has expanded far beyond the rigid boundaries of traditional country music. (1995: 2)

Here country music expands to include analogue musics already implanted within the population, wherein the interplay of transnational (traditional country/new country) and local (country music/folk and roots music) logics of contestation over the space of country music. At the same time, recall that the success of such performers inside these interlocking spaces is related not only to a shared sensibility, but also to the specifically Anglo-Celtic sounds of these musics. One would, for example, be surprised to see exponents of musical forms grounded in non-Anglo-Celtic folk and roots musics such as the Montreal Jubilation Choir, Punjabi By Nature, or the Flying Bulgar Klezmer Band nominated for an RPM Big Country Award or featured on the New Country Network. Problematizations at this level might be approached by thinking through the structures of race and ethnicity and the constructions of whiteness that obtain across the distinctions between (new) country music and world beat in non-American Anglo-Celtic settler societies like Canada or Australia (cf. Stasiulus and Yuval-Davis, 1995). Not everyone can go country.

Opened up by the tension that East Coast folk musics (and others) introduce into Canadian country music’s integration into the transnational, episodes like the broadcast of Rita MacNeil’s infomercial on Canadian television bear witness to how this space outside of the hegemony of

transnational country (and inside another) is closed down again. Other episodes, emblemized perhaps by the controversial 1991 CRTC decision which saw the birth of CISS-FM – in which it was decided to license a country station rather than the ‘black music’ radio station called for by many – underline the relative permeability of this space. Writing about Canadian country music’s need for a ‘sense of place’, John Lehr (1985) talks about strategies for state and policy intervention as a way to resist the pull of the United States for Canadian country music. Though right to be wary of his unproblematic use of ‘Canadianness’ as the pole to which identity politics in country music should be tethered, analysts and critics of culture’s international political economy would do well to revisit his use of the slogan which won *Maclean’s* magazine’s contest to complete the phrase ‘As Canadian as . . .’. ‘As Canadian as Possible . . . Under the Circumstances’, goes Lehr’s title, and it is a slogan from which we can learn, for we are always ‘under the circumstances’. If ‘the history of Canadian country music . . . generally parallels that of country music in the United States’ (CRTC, 1986: 10), then surely it is worth wondering why.

Notes

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1. MacNeil’s 1994 CBC Christmas special, ‘Once Upon a Christmas’ (aired 11 December), is articulated specifically around the themes of family and rurality; MacNeil, with family and friends/musical guests, does a performance largely in her living room, with progressive cut-aways to Christmases of her own childhood, culminating in the revelation that her grandmother had been putting money away every year for Rita MacNeil to move to Toronto to start her singing career.

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