

SOME

years ago *Maclean's* magazine ran a contest in which readers were invited to complete the phrase 'As Canadian as...' Entries ranged from the mundane 'As Canadian as maple syrup' to those which tilted at political icons or identified and lampooned our national character and foibles. Third place was taken by 'As Canadian as John Diefenbaker's French'; second place was awarded to 'As Canadian as a Royal Commission', but the first place went to the incisive 'As Canadian as possible...under the circumstances.'

Indecision and compromise are perhaps not the two most useful characteristics to be possessed by a people struggling to create a sense of identity and forge a spirit of nationhood. Canada faces unique problems in this regard. It is fragmented both linguistically and geographically and has as its neighbour a dynamic, culturally aggressive English-speaking country which outnumbers it by a ratio of ten to one. If English-speaking Canadians are to acquire a distinct sense of identity, to formulate their own images of their nation and the regions which comprise it, they must do so on their own terms, not in a cultural vacuum, but in a cultural environment protected in some measure from the onrush of attitudes, beliefs, values, and myths emanating from outside its borders, and principally from its great neighbour to the south.

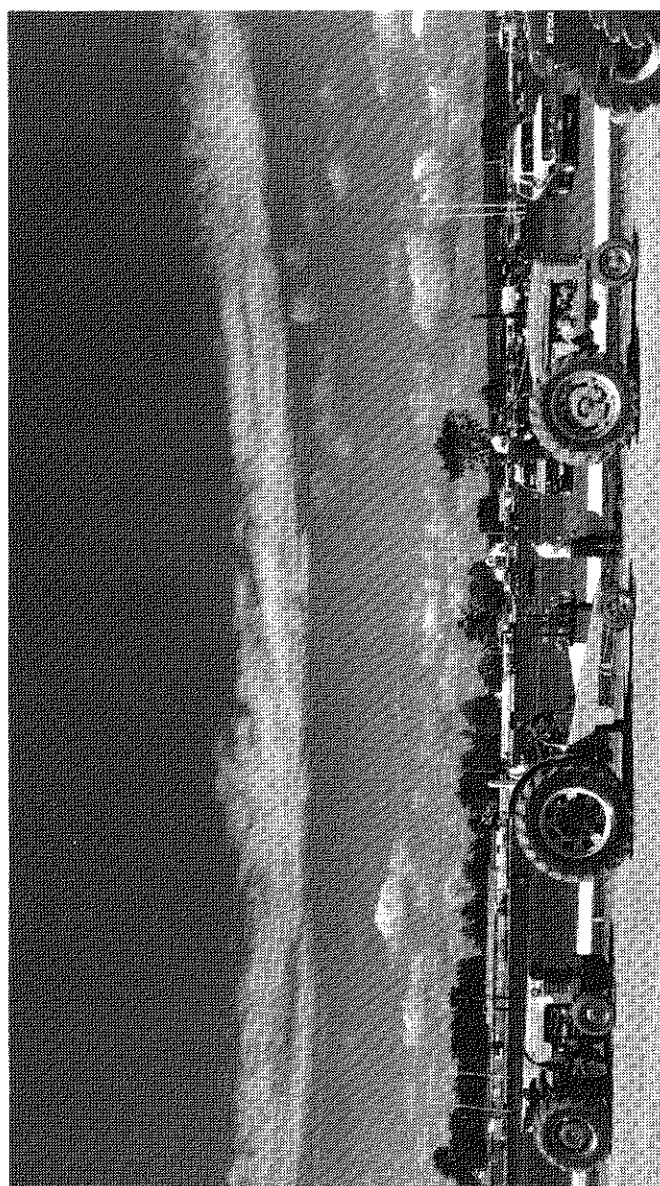
IDENTITY AND CULTURE

The process of building a sense of national identity is slow and uncertain. Its success depends on the ability of a nation to maintain a vibrant popular culture which furthers the development of a sense of place and fosters the evolution of those myths and images which are at the base of the identity, loyalty, and nationhood of all nation states.

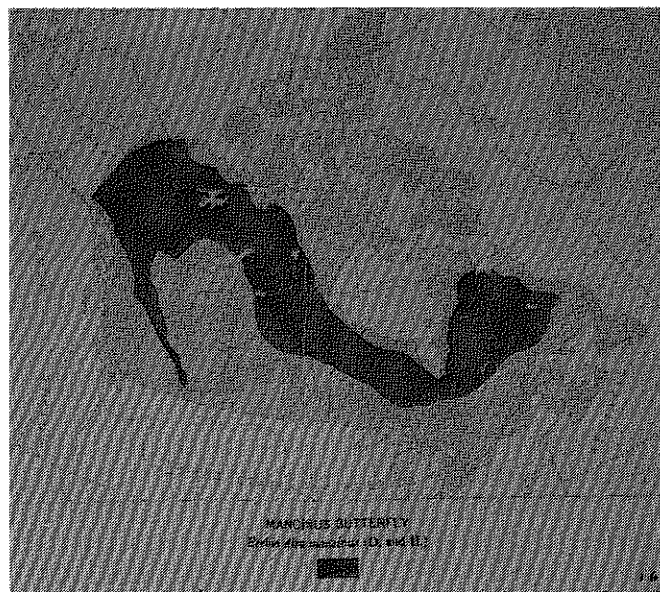
This has not been lost upon the guardians of Canadian culture. The role of popular culture as a vehicle for the dissemination of attitudes, values, and images which all contribute to the building of a Canadian identity, was clearly acknowledged in 1968 when the Federal government moved (once again) to obtain control of the broadcasting media. Under the terms of the 1968 Broadcasting Act it was stated that 'the Canadian broadcasting system (public and private) should be effectively owned and controlled by Canadians so as to safeguard, enrich, and strengthen the cultural, political, social and economic fabric of Canada.'¹

This act established the Canadian Radio-Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) as an agency to monitor and regulate the amount of non-Canadian material broadcast by any Canadian radio or television station. Power to regulate the amount of non-Canadian material was bestowed through the control of licences to broadcast. Since 1970 the CRTC has insisted that granting of new, or renewal of existing, licences be tied to the attainment of Canadian content goals which it has established. In 1971, when the rules were last revised, the Canadian content requirement for AM radio stations was fixed at 30 percent of all broadcast material; for FM stations, each of which is treated separately, the percentage may be higher.² At present these regulations are under review and may be revised upwards.

To reduce the impact of American generated material and to increase the propagation of material originating in Canada, the CRTC required that 30 percent of all recorded music broadcast by AM radio stations meet the definition of 'Canadian' by satisfying any two of four criteria: a) the instrumentation or lyrics were principally performed by a Canadian; b) the music was composed by a Canadian; c) the lyrics were written by a Canadian; d) the live



AS CANADIAN AS POSSIBLE... UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES



REGIONAL MYTHS, IMAGES OF PLACE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN CANADIAN COUNTRY MUSIC

performance was wholly recorded in Canada or broadcast live in Canada. It also required that either the music or lyrics of at least five percent of the music broadcast by a station between 6:00 am and midnight be composed by a Canadian.³

To ensure compliance, the CRTC requires that every station must furnish broadcast logs and tapes which it spot-checks for infringements of its content rules.⁶

Canadian content regulations in the broadcasting media are frequently justified on economic grounds. It is claimed that these requirements ensure that Canadians in the entertainment industry would be assured of exposure to the Canadian market. There would thus be a direct employment benefit plus incalculable spin-off benefits for Canadians at all levels: singers, musicians, songwriters, recording technicians, and recording studios. Nevertheless, it is abundantly clear that the CRTC was also motivated by a concern to nurture a fledgling Canadian culture. In 1970, Pierre Juneau, Chairman of the CRTC, asserted that:

Our mandate and our purpose is to ensure that Canadian broadcasting develops as a system for us to communicate with one another about our problems and the problems of the world; about our ideas and our views of the world; about our past and our hopes for the future, about our environment, about the quality of our lives, about our role in this area of the universe... There should be wide and free expression through song and drama... of our feelings of our joys and sorrows, of our worries, and our enthusiasms, of our angers and our generousities, of our hopes and our dreams.³

The aim was to further national identity, and as Alan W. Johnson, then president of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, clearly thought, to erect a cultural barrier to hold back the waves of material spawned in the United States which reflect and propagate the values, images, and myths of American society:

We are in a fight for our soul, for our cultural heritage and for our nationhood. Without a culture there is no political survival and we are not a nation. It is impossible to calculate, or even describe, the devastating, cumulative effects of the self-invited cultural invasion of Canada by American(s)... We simply are different from Americans in our history, traditions, institutions and values... The timeless objective of surviving has been given a new imperative by the sudden awakening of the contemporary version of our Canadian crises of identity and nationhood.⁴

COUNTRY MUSIC

If there is one genre of popular culture which stands to be influenced by the Canadian content regulations it is that of country music. Modern commercial country music is a popular cultural form which has strong folk antecedents and distinctive regional origins and associations. Its lyrical content is rich in environmental, social, and spatial images; and, unlike many other popular musical styles, lyrics are important in country music. They serve more than to accompany the melody; they are the focus of attention in the vast majority of all country songs. In the same way that the true

folk (traditional) music of times past offers insights into the social and environmental attitudes of the common non-literate folk from whence they sprang, modern commercial country music through its lyrics similarly reflects the *Weltanschauung* of the functionally, but not actively, literate ordinary people of our present society.⁷

If the proliferation of country music stations and their estimated market share of the listening audience is any guide, country music is now an extremely popular musical form throughout Canada. According to the Country Music Association's 1982 figures there are now 147 radio stations broadcasting country music in Canada, 41 of them on a full-time basis.⁸ Over the past decade the audience for country music has expanded, partly as a result of demographic factors, since it tends to appeal to a more mature (25-55) population, and partly as a result of the erosion of the image of country music as the preserve of rednecks and country simpletons. All of this makes country music a potent agent for the reflection of the regional images and myths with which it is so frequently concerned. It is a powerful medium for the creation, dissemination and popularization of images of places, geographical stereotypes and regional myths. For, as Aida Pavletich has noted, song carries a message and it influences the thoughts of people far more than many are prepared to acknowledge: 'Songs may express a chic mentality of what people believe they are supposed to think. Song expresses also what people feel, which

The lyrical imagery of the broadcast material was centred strongly in the south of the United States, principally in the states of the Confederacy. References to 'the South', 'Dixie', the Appalachians, and the Ozarks were common and uniformly positive. Individual states were frequently identified by name and were attributed specific characteristics; Texas emerged as a kind of easy-going macho utopia; Tennessee was depicted as the guardian of the basic values of rural North America, a place of poverty maybe, but rescued by adherence to family and kinship; a place of tightly-knit rural communities, well-established social order, and serenity:

**In my Tennessee mountain home
Life is as peaceful as a baby's sigh¹⁰**

Kentucky, West Virginia, Louisiana and, to a lesser extent, Georgia, Alabama, and Oklahoma, all served as spatial metaphors for home, family, stability, and known trusted values. In all cases their images were strong and complex. Despite the stress on family, security, and order, there was a counterbalancing distrust of the official manifestation of the administration of the law clearly shown by the open expression of approval of the manufacturing of illicit liquor, the flouting of excise regulations, and of other perceived unwarranted intrusions into personal freedom.

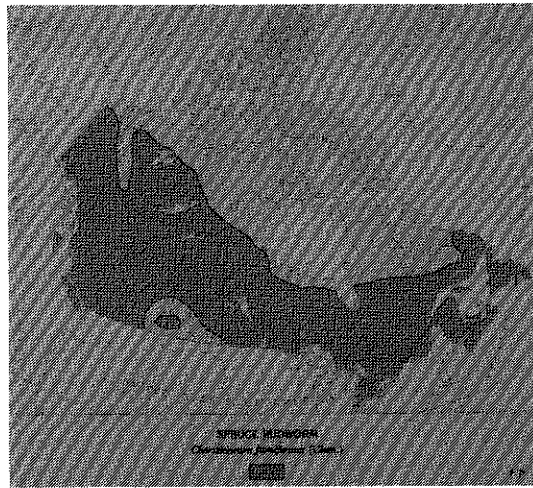
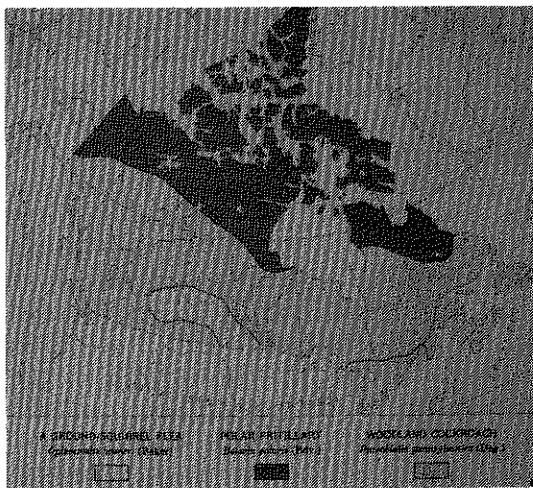
If the southern states were the sacred world, the northeastern industrial states were the profane. Portrayed as cold, in both the environmental and social senses, the northern

fact that at least 30 percent, and nearly 40 percent in the sample, of this material is considered to be 'Canadian content' and, as such, should reflect our view of Canada and ourselves. However, a consideration of the view of North America using only Canadian content material reveals that the basic structure of the mythology is little different. The same regions predominate, as attention is still focussed south of the border. Canadian content material accounts for practically all the references to Canadian places. Nevertheless, the balance is weighted strongly in favour of imagery drawn from the entrenched mythology of the regions and towns of the United States.

CANADIAN CONTENT AND PLACE IMAGERY

This preponderance of imagery centred in the United States found within Canadian material is caused partly by the structure of the CRTC regulations, partly by the origins of country music, and by the existence of a body of entrenched images basic to country music songwriting.

Since the CRTC's definition of Canadian content may be met by having a song with non-Canadian music and lyrics recorded in a Canadian studio by a Canadian singer it is quite possible for lyrics promoting strong images of the United States to be classified as Canadian. The case of 'When I Die Just Let Me Go to Texas' by Ed Bruce, Bobby Borchers and Patsy Bruce,



may differ from what they may admit to thinking.⁹ Furthermore, music, even without words, has the power to create, or to capture, a sense of place and to bestow special attributes to otherwise unremarkable places.

IMAGES IN COUNTRY MUSIC RADIO BROADCASTS

To assess the effect that the CRTC's Canadian content regulations have had upon the spectra of geographical images and settings referred to in the lyrics of country songs broadcast in Canada, I randomly sampled 24 hours of music broadcast by two Manitoba country music stations—CKRC 630 in Winnipeg and CFYR 920 in Portage la Prairie—over an eleven-month period from June 1981 through April 1982. Each record played was analyzed as to its Canadian content, lyrical content, references to places, environmental inferences, and action settings.

The material broadcast by the two stations differed in style, since CKRC is oriented towards the urban 'contemporary country' market and CFYR directed towards the rural 'traditional country' market. For both stations about 40 percent of all material met the CRTC's definition of Canadian.

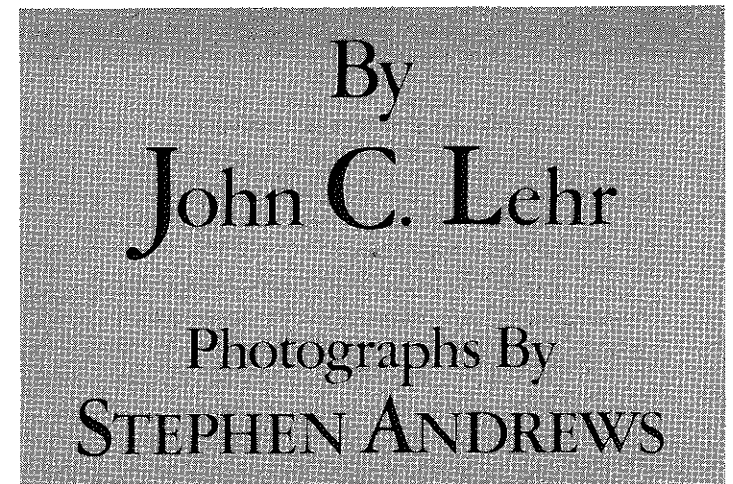
states were depicted as a Scylla and Charybdis for the migrant southerner:

**I've always heard a lot about the Big Apple
So I thought that I would come up here
and see
But all I've seen so far is one big hassle...¹¹**

California occupied an ambivalent position in country music imagery. On the one hand it was portrayed as the promised land of ease, wealth, and sunshine, whereas on the other it was the home of Hollywood, regarded as a latter-day Sodom, and used as a metaphor for shallow pretention and ostentation, the embodiment of all those values antithetical to the hard-working, unpretentious and self-effacing country folk of Tennessee.

From the sample material it became evident that country music reflected and perpetuated regional images and myths. In certain cases the regional images were sufficiently strong to function as surrogates for value statements: New York—profane; Tennessee—sacred; and the equally common country—sacred and city—profane dichotomy, the spatial embodiment of the prostitute-madonna syndrome so common in the portrayal of women in country music.¹²

There is thus a strong vision of North America purveyed to at least 20 percent of those Manitobans who listen to the radio. It is a distinctive set of geographical images which influence the way in which North American regions, cities, and towns are perceived by those who are exposed to country music radio broadcasts in Canada. It is a view distorted to some extent, it must be remembered, by the



is an excellent example. This song, recorded by American country-rock singer Tanya Tucker, enjoyed considerable popularity in the early 1980s. A 'cover-version' of this by the Canadian singer Tracy Lynn, produced in a Canadian recording studio in 1981, met the CRTC Canadian criteria and thus when broadcast was listed as Canadian. While the subsequent broadcasting of this version of this song no doubt contributed to the sale of Canadian manufactured records it is questionable whether Canadian self-images were much advanced:

**When I die, I may not go to heaven
I don't know if they let cowboys in
If they don't, just let me go to Texas
Texas is as close as I've been.¹³**

It seems evident that the promotion of distinctive images of Canada will come from Canadian writers and not from Canadian singers who rely upon American material. In this regard it is also evident that the structure of the Canadian content regulations as are presently in force cannot prevent the promotion of material with a cultural impact inimical to the philosophy of cultural nationalism espoused by the government from whence the CRTC derives its mandate.

MARKET FORCES

One of the realities facing the Canadian government in its attempts to influence the type and content of material broadcast within its borders is that a large proportion of the material from which Canadian recording artists may draw emanates from the United States. In country music the situation is exacerbated by two factors: the strong influence of a few powerful record producers who determine what is marketable and hence, by controlling access to the mass market; and the strong regional dominance in country music writers and performers. The latter prefer to deal with their subject in terms and in images



familiar to themselves and the bulk of their potential audience, and the producers, with an eye to market potential, tend to select songs with appeal to the mass country music market in the United States.¹⁴

Identification with place can be an important aspect of the success of a country music song, or any song, for that matter. In the early 1970s, for example, a Canadian country musician, Rick Neufeld, composed 'Moody Manitoba Morning'. He was pressed to change the title to 'Moody Minnesota Morning' to guarantee easy acceptance in the US market.¹⁵ To his credit he did not do so, but although his song enjoyed success in Canada it did not become popular south of the border. Neufeld missed the chance to earn thousands of dollars. The importance of place identification in market acceptance is also well-illustrated by the rewriting of the now standard 'I've Been Everywhere', popularized by Hank Snow. Written by an Australian, it celebrated Australian places; for the American market the lyrics were reworked to centre upon North American place names.

Concern for market acceptance and the financial rewards which attend popularity in the United States market thus acts against a Canadian writer employing Canadian images in song lyrics. Certainly the CRTC Canadian content regulations do not address the problem and the CRTC presumably rests content that unimaginative lyricists should promote an imported mythology lauding Texas and Tennessee.

PLACE IMAGERY AND CANADIAN WRITERS

Despite this failure of the CRTC regulations to actively promote the building of a Canadian identity of place, in the lyrical content of Canadian country music over the past decade there has been a strong sense of regional and national identity emerging in the work of some of Canada's most talented songwriters. Most notable are Ray Griff and Ian Tyson.

Griff, a former Albertan now living in Nashville, consistently celebrates Canada, Alberta, and his native town of Winfield in Alberta, in his compositions. His 'Canadian Pacific', which has been recorded by many established country music artists, centres on a three thousand mile journey from the Maritimes to Vancouver and democratically mentions each Canadian province. But though Griff's work is avowedly Canadian it lacks the powerful imagery of the songs of Ian Tyson, who, in his music, deals extensively, but not exclusively, with Canadian imagery.

Tyson has a rare feeling for sense of place and an unusual ability to evoke strong images of the settings he selects for his songs. In his earlier work 'Four Strong Winds' he wrote the first popular song which captured the vastness

and melancholy of the Canadian West. He later gave a graphic and emotionally-charged depiction of Vancouver, British Columbia, in 'Summer Wages', a song which reveals a deep understanding of the way in which physical and social attributes combine to create a unique geographical ambience:

**In all the beer parlours all down
along Main Street,
The dreams of the seasons are all spilled
down on the floor,
Of the big stands of timber, just waiting
for the fallin'
And the hookers standing watchfully
waiting by the door,
So I'll work on the tow boats with
my slippery city shoes,
Which I swore, I would never do again,
Through the grey fog-bound straits
Where the cedars stand watchin'
I'll be far off and gone, like
summer wages.¹⁶**

More recently Tyson has focussed upon the grasslands of the great basin and the Rocky Mountain foothills, seeking images of ranching life from Alberta to Texas. A product of this was what many consider to be the quintessential rodeo song, 'Someday Soon', and others which are less well-known but equally effective in their use of strong direct spatial imagery.

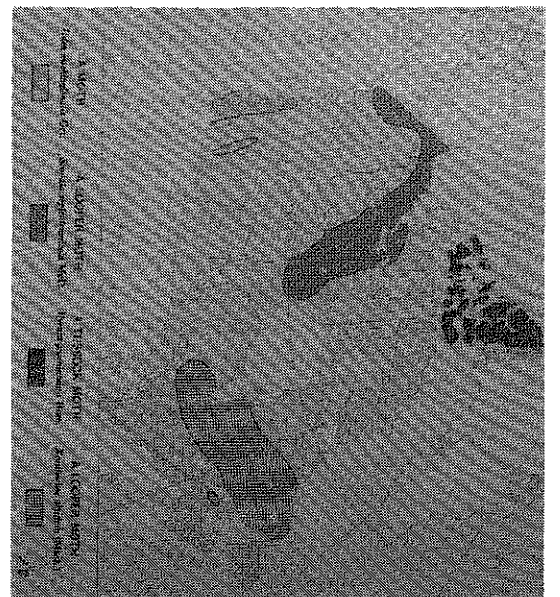
The natural lines of communication in North America run north-south, not east-west. Tyson's music reflects this, for it stresses the natural geographic linkages between Western Canada and the states of the Western Interior of the United States. The international boundary is artificial; politically significant, but irrelevant on a socio-cultural level. The West, to Tyson, is a region; within it are variations of climate and behaviour, but it retains a strong regional integrity:

**Well, them of' boys down in Texas
chew Copenhagen
Wash it all down with that Coors
Ain't a bit bashful about speakin'
their minds
They'll tell you what's theirs and
what's yours
There's Waylon and there's Willie,
they own about half the state
And sing of her glories all in song...**

**Well up north it's saddle broncs and
its hockey and honky tonks
Old Wilf Carter 78s
Dumb stuff like chores when it's 20 below
They're the things a
country boy hates...¹⁷**

Here Tyson is formulating a distinctive Canadian approach to regional imagery in writing music. The Nashville approach is to emphasize the north-south, industrial-rural regional model which fits the poor southern white migratory experience. This is inappropriate for Canada since the geographical relationships differ. In Canada real regional contrasts are intra-national—east-west—not international—north-south.

Furthermore, the direction and form of the migratory experience basic to country music



differs markedly between Canada and the United States. The model celebrated by United States' country music lyrics is that of the poor white rural southerner seeking economic benefits by migrating to the urban-industrial complexes of the northeastern states. In Canada the rural urban drift has been less focussed in a spatial sense. The recent migratory movements of the 1970s, spawned by the growth of the hydrocarbon industries in Alberta and Saskatchewan, saw a movement from the urban areas of central Canada and the small towns of the Maritimes to the resource frontiers of the West. For many of those involved this entailed leaving a major metropolitan centre such as Toronto, Ontario, and moving to a smaller urban centre such as Edmonton, or to the resource towns of the Rocky Mountain foothills, to the Peace River district, or to the boreal margins. The migration path was east to west and principally urban to urban, although the movement can also be seen as one from the metropolitan heartland to the provinces of the largely rural hinterland.

All of this is succinctly expressed by Tyson, who identifies the major components of this migration, creates new metaphors to convey its dynamism and social character, and builds towards the establishment of a regional myth of Alberta as wide open rural ranching frontier. Like all good country music images Tyson's image of Alberta is highly selective, with a blurred division of reality and fiction:

**It's wall to wall pickups in the parkin'
lot tonight
That 'Oh thank god it's Friday'
feelin's here
They got a line-up at the back door,
they got three deep at the bar
Just knockin' back the shooters and
drinkin' beer.
So gas up your old Chevrolet and
head'er way out west
To the land of golden opportunity
You'll get a first-hand education of how
the cowboy rocks and rolls
With that old Alberta Moon thrown
in for free¹⁸**

Not only is the feeling of rural small town Alberta captured but, with startling economy of words, the major socio-geographical regional differences between Ontario and Alberta are portrayed by the use of simple socio-spatial imagery. The implication is that Toronto is the urbane metropolitan centre but that Alberta maintains a sense of adventure and freedom:

**Toronto may be Rhythm and Blues, but
if you migrate here
You'll be howlin' at that
Old Alberta Moon.**¹⁹

Put more simply, the image is Alberta—sacred, Toronto—profane.

THE CRTC

Canadians have similarly made considerable contributions to the evolution of the imagery of country music in the United States, where they have been instrumental in fabricating some of the most enduring regional myths perpetuated through the genre. The image of the US southwest, for example, results partly from evocative country songs such as 'Tumbling Tumbleweeds' and 'Cool Water', both regarded by many as the definitive western songs, and both written by Bob Nolan, a Canadian from New Brunswick. Canadians are equally capable of creating similarly powerful and lasting images for their own country. Indeed, a brief presented to the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee in 1981 by the (Canadian) Academy of Country Music entertainment argued that there is no shortage of Canadian-oriented country music written, performed, and recorded by Canadians.²⁰ Yet if the sample of broadcast material examined in this study is at all representative, there is not yet a distinctive Canadian exchange of images, analogies and metaphor being broadcast on the airwaves of Canadian radio stations, despite their adherence to the Canadian content rules of the CRTC. Clearly these regulations are ineffective in controlling the substance of the material broadcast within the nation. If, as Alan Johnson claimed, 'we are in a fight for our soul, for our cultural heritage, and for our nationhood,' the CRTC is fighting the wrong enemy with the wrong weapons.²¹

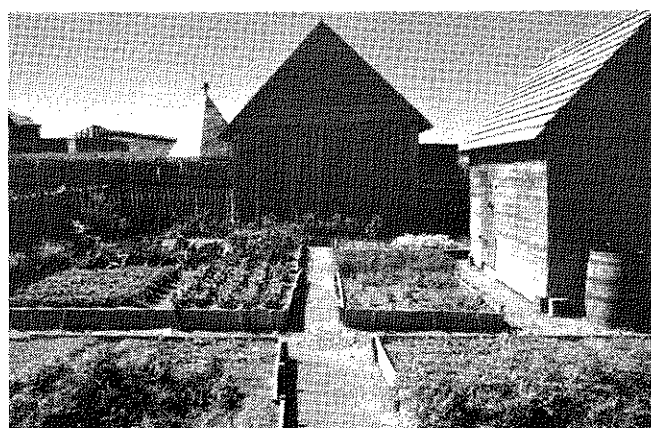
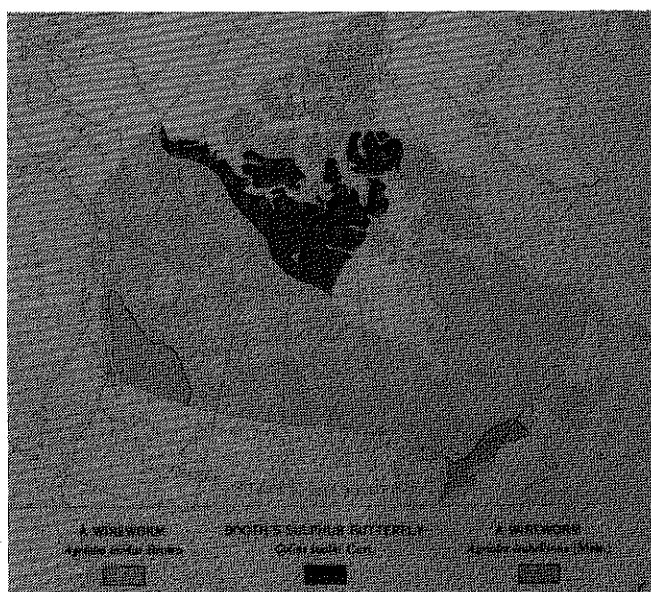
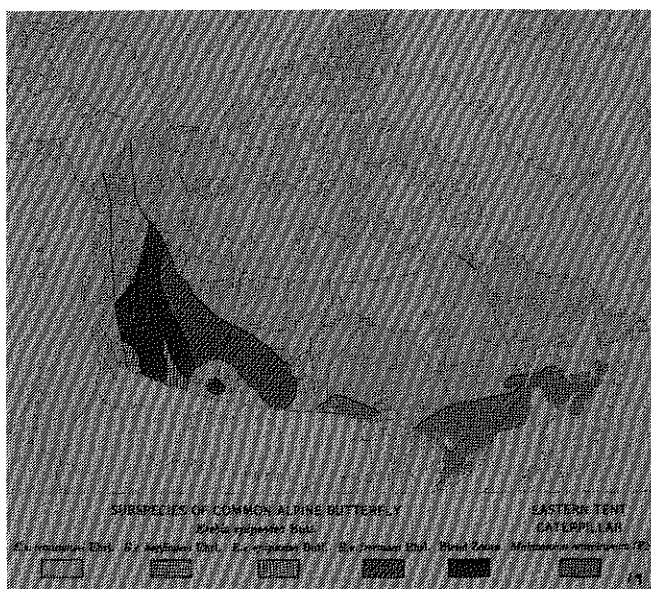
The CRTC does not appear to be concerned about the neglect of Canada as a setting for country music lyrics, yet many Canadian songwriters do have misgivings. In an oral presentation to the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee, the Academy of Country Music Entertainment let Canadian songwriter Wayne Rostad put their case for them:

We must look in our own backyards; we must not be afraid to name our cities, our towns, our people. We have to stop writing for that American hook, stop prostituting the art form, or the realism. In our own backyard there is a wealth of stories and happenings to tell (of) that will contribute our own unique (identity) to country music.²²

Market demands may argue against Rostad's exhortation. Commercial radio program directors are interested in selling air time to clients who wish to advertise a product or a service. Advertisers, in turn, demand a large audience which has specific demographic characteristics, a demand which has a major impact on the nature and content of music that is played. Ryand and Peterson have argued that a pursuit of a wider listening audience has led to changes in the nature of country music imagery, concluding that 'the interests of Proctor and Gamble, Burger King, and the local drugstore impinge directly upon the aesthetics of country music.'²³

In this Achilles heel lies the real opportunity of the CRTC to effectively promote a sense of nationhood within the country music field in Canada. Since programmers may be wary of songs with metaphors and images that are new and unfamiliar to their listening audience, and

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hence may prefer to rely upon formulaic repetition of old familiar images derived from south of the border, Canadian writers may feel pressed to deal in such images, knowing that market acceptance of their material is thereby enhanced. A rewording of the Canadian content criteria to acknowledge the significance of lyrical material treating a subject in Canadian terms might begin to counter this tendency and encourage the broadcasting of material by Canadian writers such as Tyson, Griff, and Rostad.

Until Canadian country music songwriters feel able to draw with equal facility for their images, analogies, and metaphors from within Canada as well as from the geographical mythology of the United States, they can do little to further the cause of Canadian identity. In the meantime, Canadian country music will simply have to remain as Canadian as possible...under the circumstances.

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