

## 8 Global success, identitarian performance, and Canadian popular music

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In the introduction to *The British Pop Dandy*, Stan Hawkins (2009, 3) speaks of ‘the tangible notions of national ethnicity and male behaviour’ which have inflected a long history of British pop celebrity. Nations are woven of multiple ethnicities, of course, but Hawkins shows how national cultures often work to ‘ethnicise’ certain perceived common features as the basis of national character. As Hawkins’ treatment of the dandy shows, this ethnicisation is distributed unevenly across the terrain of gender, producing stereotypes of national character which rarely attach themselves with equal sticking power to both men and women. If the male dandy has served as one modulating figure within a broader construction of Englishness, female versions thereof – or other figures of equivalent renown – have been absent or only partial in their elaboration.

This chapter looks at cultural celebrity in Canada, and at female musical celebrity in particular. I will trace something of the ‘problem’ this celebrity has posed for critical commentary, which struggled to find ways of understanding the extraordinary commercial success of Canadian female musical performers in the 1990s and early 2000s. During a period hailed for the perceived transnational ascendancy of the female musical artist, three Canadians – Celine Dion, Alanis Morissette, and Shania Twain – became the most commercially successful solo female musical performers in the world. Just as the circulation of Canadian music through the world was largely the result of these successes by women, so, too, was the broader domain of transnational female musical celebrity ‘Canadianised’, to a degree never seen before or since. For large numbers of commentators, this success was seen to rest on hazy, indeterminate versions of ‘national ethnicity’ possessing none of the rich resonances of the British dandy – or, to suggest a very different example, the ‘social realist’ singer of 1930s France (Conway 2004).

International commentary on the success of these three female artists made only superficial attempts to divine, across their personae, the basis of a shared Canadian ‘ethnicity’. Celine Dion was a Québécoise, of course, and the other two were Anglo-Canadian, but these differences often went unremarked in music industry press accounts of the ‘wave’ of Canadian successes. When the ‘Canadianness’ of these performers was noted in non-specialist music criticism,

it was often, as in the *Observer* commentary to which I shall turn shortly, to briefly observe the bland lack of charisma in all three figures, and to bemoan their ability to produce successful middle-of-the-road versions of musical genres, such as grunge or country, whose more authentic and transformative versions were to be found elsewhere. This dismissal reflects longstanding biases against the emotive and degraded character of female musical culture, as scholars such as Sarah Thornton (1995, 5) and Diane Railton (2001, 321) have shown. In the case of Dion, Morissette, and Twain, commentary would also diagnose that lack of particularity that Irish observer Kieran Keohane (1997, 34) once saw as lying at the heart of Canadian settler-colonial identity. The same haziness of national identity had already been noted in female Canadian singers by *Village Voice* critic Katherine Dieckmann, writing in 1994: ‘Yet Canada remains forever neutral, even undifferentiated, to most US minds. It’s a hard place to feel specific about, except to note that some native speakers unfurl beautifully attenuated O’s and moody girl singers grow on trees up there’ (1994, 32).

Later, I will contrast this diagnosed lack of specificity of the female Canadian performer with the strongly etched clarity one finds in the construction of a male Canadian ‘national ethnicity’ during roughly the same period. This latter construction produced figures of Canadian masculinity which would circulate across the stage of transnational media culture – the stoner metal head, the comic loser, and, most importantly, the ‘hoser’. As Canadian female musical performers reached the highest levels of international success, the claims that they were lacking in both charisma and particularity seemed to make them weak embodiments of Hawkins’s ‘national ethnicity’. Such judgements proliferated even as Canadian male celebrities working in the field of television and cinema produced a robust and nationally cherished version of what it might mean to be Canadian.

### **‘The women of rock’**

The period being examined here begins with the release of *Unison*, Celine Dion’s first album in English, in 1990. It runs through the mid-2000s, when the career arcs of Alanis Morissette and Shania Twain began to be marked by declining sales and/or delays in the release of anticipated albums. The significant successes of women recording artists in the English-speaking world during this period have been noted by Susan McClary (2000), and were the focus of celebratory reporting at the time, as in the 1997 issue of *Rolling Stone* devoted to ‘The Women of Rock’ (Lafrance et al. 2011, 557–558). Recent scholarly analyses of music industry charts from this period have called into question some of these celebratory claims. Lafrance, Worcester, and Burns have suggested that the number of hits in the United States by male artists during the period 1996–1999 was double that by women, and that longstanding patterns of masculine dominance had hardly been interrupted (Lafrance et al. 2011; see also Wells 2001, 226). Indeed, it now seems clear that claims about the ascendancy

of female artists in the 1990s were inspired more by a steady stream of high-profile albums by women reaching the top of music popularity charts than by any rigorous analysis of the relative strength of male and female artists in the markets for music. Nevertheless, as David Brackett has suggested, the popularity chart is ‘a form of symbolic, expressive coding’ which contributes to the intelligibility of popular musical culture at any given point (Brackett 2016, 28). In the late 1990s, as coverage of Dion, Morissette, and Twain spilled out into mainstream media, it was easy to see the charts in *Billboard* and other media as confirming their unprecedented successes within the markets for popular music. We may also take, from the work of Lafrance et al. (2011), a sense of the difference between those charts which measure actual record sales and others registering radio airplay or other indicators of institutional selection. The latter, these authors note, are often unreflective of the actual preferences of listeners and record buyers, and are more likely than album sales charts to assert the success of male performers (ibid., 566). For this, and other reasons, the charts on which I draw for this chapter are, for the most part, those measuring the sales of albums in the United States and other markets.

### Canadian invasions

In 2007, the Melbourne, Australia-based newspaper *The Age* published a list of the best-selling albums in Australia over the previous ten years (‘The Sound of a Decade’). In a blog presenting this chart, journalist Stephen Walker asked whether ‘record charts [can] reflect the hearts and minds of a country?’ This question would receive no conclusive response, but Walker found, in the list of best-selling albums in his country, evidence with which to tackle longstanding stereotypes about the Australian character. While these might imagine Australian musical tastes as ‘favouring bellicose bellowing, shrill shrieking voices or pub rock pounding’, the list before Walker’s eyes revealed a ‘mellow mix’, one that betrayed an ‘easy-listening nation driving down the middle of the road’. This judgement was prompted by the fact that eight of the ten albums topping the chart were by solo female performers (or, in two cases, ensembles in which female voices dominated).

Almost unmentioned in Walker’s commentary on this chart was the fact that the top two places were occupied by albums from Canadian artists – Shania Twain’s *Come On Over* and Alanis Morissette’s *Jagged Little Pill*. Celine Dion’s album *Falling Into You* was in fifth place, and these three albums by Canadian performers joined Madonna’s *Immaculate Collection* (no. 7) and Norah Jones’ *Come Away With Me* (no. 9) as proof that Australians are ‘very internationalist in our musical taste’. In what seems a veiled reference to British artists being unrepresented in the top ten, the author noted the absence of any proof of ‘imperialist cultural dominance’. Arguably, the remnants of imperialist global circuits and affinities might help to explain Canada’s success in producing musical figures whose superstardom extended across networks of white settler cultures (and the British Commonwealth, in particular), but this is a question for another day.

What is noteworthy here is how a ‘mellow mix’ dominated by female and Canadian pop celebrities was seen as challenging the macho self-image of Australian popular musical culture.

Eight years earlier, a journalist for the British newspaper the *Observer* had been preoccupied with the Canadian origins of the music then moving around the world. Sam Taylor noted that – seemingly against all odds – two Canadian artists, Celine Dion and Shania Twain, were among the top five female artists of the decade. In a variation of the ‘Blame Canada’ meme sent into circulation in the year in which he was writing (by the film *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut*), Taylor asked:

What did we ever do to Canada? A bit of harmless colonisation, some casual exploitation. Surely not enough to justify the simultaneous invasion, in one week, of Celine Dion, Shania Twain and Alanis Morissette? The charismaless chunk at the top of North America lay, until recently, at 84th in the world pop rankings. Yet suddenly it has surged to the summit with a trio of one-time child stars turned globally famous pop divas.

Morissette’s grunge-lite bubble may already have burst – her second album, the unlistenable *Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie*, has flopped alarmingly but in Celine and Shania, Canada boasts two of the five biggest-selling female artists of the decade: the undisputed champion and the hot new challenger in the brutal, cut-throat world of heavyweight MOR singing.

(Taylor 1999; emphasis in the original)

As Carl Wilson has shown, the double condescension here, directed both at Canada and at the practice of ‘MOR singing’, has followed Celine Dion throughout her career (Wilson 2008, 18–21). Here it is allowed to settle, as well, on Shania Twain and Alanis Morissette, in large measure through the claim that all three of these figures were ‘one-time child stars’. It is true that Celine Dion first recorded in her adolescence, and that Shania Twain briefly appeared on a mainstream Canadian television programme at the age of 13. It was well known in Canada that, at the age of 17, Alanis Morissette, recording simply as Alanis, released two dance-pop albums which saw some success in the national market. Nevertheless, the misleading reference to one-time ‘child stars’ functions simultaneously to cast all three of these performers as somehow freakish, and Canadian celebrity culture as tacky, devious, or fraudulent in the ways it offers up at least two of these performers as over-night successes. Taylor’s piece would go on to suggest that, while the popularity of Shania Twain and Celine Dion had more staying power, Morissette’s bubble had already burst. In fact, however, her follow-up to *Jagged Little Pill*, the album *Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie*, would sell 9,000,000 copies worldwide. It is now referenced in discussions of cultural commodities whose degrees of failure were over-stated (Kaufman 1998; ‘What’s the “Best” selling FLOP album ever!’)

In a widely circulated *New Yorker* article from 2013, journalist Bill Wyman offered a chart of 30 best-selling albums that he claimed reflected worldwide

popularity more accurately than most (Wyman 2013). By compiling sales information from different national recording industries, Wyman set out to puncture unjustified claims which had been circulating in recent years – like the inflated assertion that Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* had sold a hundred million copies. At least two things are of interest to us here. The first is that the only Canadians to appear in this list are three female solo artists: once again, Celine Dion, Alanis Morissette, and Shania Twain. Between them, these account for four of the five albums by solo female singers on the list (or five out of six, if we give Celine Dion principal performer credit for the *Titanic* soundtrack). The *Bodyguard* soundtrack, credited to Whitney Houston, is the only other album by a solo female performer. The most striking feature of this list overall is its confirmation of the masculinism of popular music superstardom over a period covering several decades. What it shows as well, however, is that Canada is represented exclusively by female performers, just as the loftiest heights of female superstardom are occupied, with one exception, by Canadians.

### Transnational circulations

My interest in Dion, Morissette, and Twain encompasses a fascination with the transnational geometries drawn by their success, with the constellations of places in which they have proven popular and with the rising and falling arcs of this popularity. What might we say about the lines of circulation which take Canadian musical celebrity around the world and the conditions which render that mobility possible? While there is an abundance of work on transnationalism in relation to music, from the foundational theoretical writings of Veit Erlmann (1993) and others through a variety of recent case studies (for example, Jin 2019), I have found additionally useful conceptual frameworks in the study of literature and of literary globalisation. From the important work of Wai Chee Dimock (2001, 173–175) on the relationship of literature to national territories, I take two sets of concepts. Both of these are intended to see the movement of cultural forms as energetic processes which constantly challenge the boundaries of nation and region on which we customarily draw in imagining musical markets and audiences. One of Dimock’s contributions is her conceptualisation of the receding and unfolding extensions of a cultural form; the other is the notion of a radius of literary action. Both of these, I would suggest, are easy to translate into musical terms. While the emphasis of much work on musical transnationalism is on the encounter of forms (and subsequent processes of adaptation or hybridisation), Dimock’s analytic vocabulary lends itself more easily, I suggest, to what might be called the ‘geometries’ of movement of musical commodities, the pathways along which their popularity is established and along which success gathers momentum or is dissipated.

One of these pathways is that by which the celebrity and commercial success of Celine Dion took her out of the confines of the Canadian market. Three milestones mark this movement. One is Dion’s victory in the Eurovision song contest in 1988, when she represented Switzerland with the song ‘Ne partez pas

sans moi'. The second is the release of her first English-speaking album, *Unison*, in 1990. A third milestone was the launch in 1998 of her French-language album *D'eux*, which became the best-selling album of all time in France and the best-selling French-speaking album in history. In the terms which Dimock offers, we find, in Dion's unfolding success, an evolving radius of action within a complex set of geometries. The 1988 Eurovision victory obviously helped Celine Dion move through the media culture of Europe. Her 1990 English-speaking album was followed by a series of songs in Hollywood movie soundtracks, which took her deeper into Anglo-American popular culture and its places of global take-up; by the time of her hugely successful French-language album *D'eux*, in 1998, her successes in both languages could echo off each other, at least partially. Singles from *D'eux*, for example, reached the British Top 10, for reasons we may attribute both to an unconditional devotion on the part of her fans (one able to overlook differences of language) and to the outward extension of Dion's success in continental Europe.

In the list of the top-selling albums of all time in Germany (those having sold a million copies or more), only three are by Canadian artists and all of these are Celine Dion albums ('List of best-selling albums in Germany'). All three are English-language albums, as well, but it's hard not to imagine Celine Dion's massive success in French as helping to build momentum which pushed the success of the English albums or at the very least anchored Dion's celebrity persona in Europe. The unfolding extensions of Dion's career at one level simply made her global, but this involved a movement through the media institutions and musical cultures of Europe which one must imagine in lateral terms – as a set of conquests accomplished one by one – and not simply as an undifferentiated success dropped in from on high. In Dimock's (2006, 3) terms, these multiple and overlapping trajectories towards success produce what she calls the 'deep time' of cultural history, in which the ties that attach Dion's music to different parts of the world are varied in character and duration.

The career of Alanis Morissette has not been so lengthy, nor so complicated by language. We know that, among albums released in the US between 1991 and 2014, Alanis Morissette's *Jagged Little Pill* was the third biggest seller in that country ('List of best-selling albums in the United States of the Nielsen SoundScan era'), and that, according to Wyman's revision of worldwide rankings, it is the 14th best-selling album of all time worldwide. If we look at the international breakdown of her sales, we see the dispersal of her popularity – it moves out from Canada after her earlier, two-album incarnation as a pop star, then, with her 'grunge' persona, fans out to the United States, then across Europe and Australasia. Interestingly, even as her sales fall with subsequent albums, that fall is uneven at the international level, if we may judge by chart positions in different markets.

With Shania Twain, we see a pattern whereby both Canada and the US became the sites of her initial success with her second album, *The Woman in Me*, a success followed by a simultaneous explosion of the third and fourth albums in multiple European and Australasian territories. In the case of most

Canadian musicians, one of the interesting questions is that of the extent to which the US is simply one more territory within a broader radius of success which unfolds evenly, or a trampoline from which success elsewhere follows in relatively uniform fashion. Alanis Morissette would seem to have followed the first of these pathways; Shania Twain, the second.

Those who write about literary globalisation and literary translation will often write about the degree of isochrony of different literary markets: the extent to which they are ahead of or behind each other, the degree of simultaneity in the taking up of new works. Isochrony is persistent in the literary world for several reasons, the most important of which is the delay of linguistic translation. This would seem to be much less important, in both a literal and a figurative sense of the term, in the case of popular music. Since the 1970s, the language of songs has rarely been changed as part of their transnational migration. In the 1960s, it was common in Quebec, as in so many other regions of the world, for English-language hits to enter the local market through translations into the local language. This practice of what we might call ‘translating inwards’ – bringing music into Quebec through translation – would mostly wither by the 1970s, with the decline of cover versions generally. In the 1970s, and intermittently, one saw the practice of ‘translating outwards’ – of translating a French-language song into English as a means of ensuring its mobility out of the Quebec market. Gilles Vigneault’s ‘Mon Pays’, an anthem of Quebec nationalism, became an international disco hit in 1976, when Patsy Gallant recorded it as ‘From New York to L.A.’. At roughly the same time, the Montreal-based disco group Toulouse took a French-language album of two years earlier, translated the songs into English, and, with no attempt to hide their motives, gave it the new title of ‘Export’ (Straw 2016).

In a less literal sense, however, the question of translation brings us to the relationship of Alanis Morissette to grunge music, of Shania Twain to country, and of Celine Dion to the tradition of the French *chanson*. We might say, of all three, that they take music from a very close elsewhere (the United States and France), then magnify it outwards, in processes we might regard as loosely translational. This account is complicated, however, by the peculiar relationship of Canada to the United States and of Quebec to France. English-Canadian performers sit in relationship to American culture somewhere between positions of indistinguishable belonging and neo-colonial mimesis, and Quebec’s relationship to France is in many ways similar. Critics and scholars will examine Alanis Morissette and Shania Twain closely, looking for signs that betray a Canadian inflection of grunge or country – typically, they will locate this Canadian inflection in a certain reserve. The ambiguity of these figures centres on the question of whether they have perfectly mastered a form born elsewhere or, more simply, emerged within a cross-border musical culture in which no one is more fully at home than anyone else.

It is the case, nevertheless, that more copies of *Jagged Little Pill* were sold, in the United States and around the world, than of any other so-called grunge album, including Nirvana’s *Nevermind*. Shania Twain sold more copies of

*Come On Over* than the American Garth Brooks – the other great success in country music since the 1980s – sold of any one of his albums. Celine Dion’s most important competitor in the field of contemporary, middle-of-the-road pop in the 1990s, was undoubtedly Whitney Houston, but a wide variety of charts confirm the former’s much greater success. In each of these cases, Canadian celebrities carried with them, around the world, the most successful versions of some of the dominant musical forms of their time.

We might ascribe these achievements to some Canadian talent for the perfect imitation of models developed elsewhere, but this is to unfairly dismiss the creative distinctiveness of these Canadian artists (and to overlook the extent to which all musical fields involve dynamic relationships of imitation and differentiation.) An alternate explanation likewise risks demeaning these three performers, but is worth noting. In her studies of literary celebrity, Faye Hammill (2007, 4–9) has noted how the middle brow novel of the interwar period – in England, Canada, and elsewhere – was highly popular and most often written by women, and for both of these reasons typically left out of serious histories of literature. For the last 20 or 30 years, Canadian literary culture has been dominated by women authors, large numbers of whom write in a realist mode distinct from the wilfully self-marginalising experimental mode adopted by so many of their male colleagues. It may be that the extraordinary but often invisible success of Shania Twain and Alanis Morissette is perceived (or ignored) through the prisms of prejudice similar to those which have greeted literary works by women, which see them as sanitised practitioners of forms whose rebellious edge has been removed, and thus as more palatable across broader audiences.

There are, however, other reasons we might use to explain the extraordinary success of Celine Dion, Alanis Morissette, and Shania Twain. One is the relative invisibility of Canadian musical culture and its media systems to those living outside the country. One effect of this obscurity is that the early stages in which a career is launched in Canada go unseen by those located elsewhere. Celine Dion, as is well known, came out of a regional tradition of singing contests in Quebec; Alanis Morissette had an early two-album career at the national level as teen-pop artist; Shania Twain was briefly on Canadian television as an adolescent and toured with cover bands before going to Nashville and making it big. This capacity to appear to arrive more or less fully-formed onto the American musical landscape, rather than having pursued one’s apprenticeship within the latter’s closely-monitored institutions, is one possible explanation of these three women’s success. Canadian singer Amanda Marshall, asked by a journalist in 1997 to explain the seemingly sudden rise of Canadian female superstars, answered as follows:

Everyone asks me, ‘What is going on with Canadian women? What the hell is in the water up there?’ ... The people who are getting all the attention now, including myself, have been working much longer than people have been aware of us.

(Grills 1997, 135)



Another explanation for the success of Dion, Morissette, and Twain might invoke the place of celebrity within the regulatory and subventionary infrastructures of the Canadian media system. Content quotas, reward systems, public financing, and a range of other forms of support attach themselves to Canadian performers who have garnered any observable level of success. With Canadian media required to air designated quotas of Canadian content, and with a shortage of performers of high visibility to fulfil these quotas, those who attain a certain level of celebrity find themselves and their music endlessly recycled on radio and television. This works for performers of all genres, but we might speculate that it works particularly well for those performing emotive sorts of pop music which cross radio formats. It works, as well, for those whose music has so successfully detached itself from fleeting trends that it can become a staple of media content over long periods of time. Alanis Morissette – tied, as she was at the moment of her emergence, to the alternative rock/grunge boom – was able to outlive that moment more successfully than others by using the scale and distinctiveness of her success as a means to disengage herself from that phenomena as it receded.

If a shared and distinctive temporality may be observed in the three careers examined here, it is not the belatedness of a Canadian music which is somehow behind, but the temporal arc of careers which, for a variety of reasons, are allowed to accumulate and preserve their success more slowly and over longer periods of time. This slowness is, as suggested, partly an effect of the Canadian media system, with its tendency to preserve and maintain. That durable success is an effect, as well, of the ways in which female stardom in country music, in angst-ridden rock, and in romantic ballads in both languages has moved all three performers into the more slowly-changing and preservational fields of adult pop and adult contemporary radio.

### **Gendered formations of Canadian celebrity**

In 2004, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation launched a nationwide poll to determine the ‘Greatest Canadians’ of all time (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation 2004). When the list was completed and made public, it produced major embarrassment: the top ten ‘Greatest Canadians’ were all male. Symptomatically, the person voted ‘Greatest Canadian’ was Tommy Douglas, a long-dead politician who initiated Canada’s public system of health care. The second on this list was Terry Fox, a cancer sufferer who, in 1980, ran across Canada on one leg to raise money for cancer, but died of the disease before his mission was complete. Others in the top ten were politicians, sports figures, and scientists: there were no artists or performers. Nor, quite remarkably, could one find any of the three women who had become among the best-selling musical performers of all time.

It is common, when speaking of Canadians who have achieved international celebrity status in the cultural field, to refer to English-Canadians working in the US film and television industries. Those whose names resonate most vibrantly are almost without exception male, such as William Shatner, Christopher Plummer, Jim Carrey,

and, more recently, the two Ryans, Gosling and Reynolds. More specifically, the cultural formation in which English-Canadians see themselves as having had the greatest success internationally is comedy. One well-entrenched genealogy of Canadian celebrity draws lines between the sketch comedy nurtured with the Canadian television programme SCTV and the American network television programme Saturday Night Live, noting the overlapping professional biographies and collaborative networks in which might be found Canadian-born performers like John Candy, Mike Myers, Rick Moranis, Martin Short, and the originator and long-time producer of Saturday Night Live, Lorne Michaels. Another more recent formation of Canadian celebrity has insinuated itself within the strain of homosocial comedy associated with the American-born director Judd Apatow. Here, Canadian-born performers like Seth Rogen, Ellen Page, Michael Cera, and Jay Baruchel have been central figures.

English-Canadians speculate endlessly about the reasons for their success in US comedy – much more, I would add, than they reflect upon the success of their female solo musical performers. The most commonly offered answer to why Canadians are successful comedians is that Canadians share profound insight into the social and cultural life of the United States while possessing the distance from it which renders ironic and humorous commentary possible. This is the diagnosis of the English-Canadian condition offered in 2007 by the Canadian-born actor/screenwriter Seth Rogen:

You have all of the American culture already there in your head, but no loyal attachment to it, so you can make fun of it. And when you watch the news you don't think, 'Man we're fucked!' You think, 'Man, they're fucked!' It's great, like there's an automatic fake moral high ground that's just built in to whichever situation you're in.

(Patterson 2007)

The constructions of Canadian celebrity described here are highly masculinist. So, too, are most of the prominent narratives of Canadian performers finding success on the terrain of popular music. When the Justin Bieber documentary film *Never Say Never* (2011) was released, it was immediately inserted within the small canon of influential Canadian documentary films made about male performers, alongside *Lonely Boy*, the acclaimed 1962 film about the Ottawa-born singer Paul Anka, and the long-canonised *Ladies and Gentleman, Mr. Leonard Cohen*, released by the National Film Board of Canada in 1965. To varying degrees, all of these films cast their central figures as elusive, enigmatic artists whom the filmmakers laboured to understand. In contrast, the major documentary film about Celine Dion, *Celine: Through the Eyes of the World* (released theatrically in 2010), received generally mixed reviews and was both hailed and denounced for its efforts to humanise the performer and offer a sense of intimate connection. Many saw it as too blatantly promotional, an accusation rarely directed at the male subjects of the documentaries just mentioned. Neither Shania Twain nor Alanis Morissette have been the focus of documentary treatments extending beyond the network backstage special or the lengthy confessional television interview.

## Hosers and stoners

In 2012, a graduate student from Germany visited my department to study the place of irony within Canadian culture. To take up the question, I organised a small workshop, with other students and young faculty members. The visiting German graduate student wondered if there was a connection, in Canada, between irony and the versions of hipster culture then observable in Montreal's gentrifying neighbourhoods. As we began sketching in the features of the contemporary ironic hipster, we found ourselves returning to a prominent figure within Canadian popular and celebrity culture over the past 30 years: that of the so-called 'hoser'. This figure is difficult to describe, but its roots may be traced to the sketch comedy popularised by Rick Moranis and Dave Thomas in their 'Great White North' segments on the Canadian comedy show SCTV in the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> A hoser, here, was a young man who drank beer, wore exaggeratedly Canadian winter hats (*toques*), and was distinguished by his low ambition and achievement. One etymology for 'hoser', published on the Urban Dictionary (but not generally known), traces it back to the bullied or unpopular boy who had to 'hose down' a hockey rink after a game ('Hoser' 2007).

The 'hoser' was offered as a momentary figure of fun, but it has resonated backwards and forwards in time. Backwards, it enriched influential claims made about English-Canadian cinema of the 1970s: that our films were full of masculine loser figures, 'little brothers' who faded under the light cast by the Americans to the south (see, for a summary, Ramsay 1993). Forwards in time, the hoser lingered as part of the genetic make-up for comic characters, from the 1980s through the 2000s, embodied by Canadians in entertainment texts produced in both Canada and the US. 'Wayne's World', the popular sketch on Saturday Night Live, which became the basis of two films featuring Canadian Mike Myers and American Dana Carvey, established the link between the hoser and hard rock which has been one of its significant variations. The Canadian Keanu Reeves, in the US-made films *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* (1989) and *Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey* (1991), helped to set in place the stoner obliviousness which has been another of its inflections. As if the figure was moving too far away from its roots, two threads in Canadian comedy in the 2000s have returned the hoser figure to Canadian landscapes: the two films *Fubar* (2002) and *Fubar: Balls to the Wall* (2010) – FUBAR is a military term meaning 'Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition' – are about beer-drinking, stoned metal heads with so-called 'hockey hair', living in the Canadian province of Alberta. The Canadian television series *Trailer Park Boys* (2011–2018), set in the eastern province of Nova Scotia, featured sub-proletariat, beer-drinking semi-criminals living in a trailer park and forever in trouble with the law.

If the specificity and sharp lines of the hoser persona nevertheless fail to make it as internationally resonant a cultural figure as the British dandy, both nevertheless stand as repositories for ideas about masculinity which draw on broader ideas about national character while hiding that generality behind the disguise of eccentricity and deviance. Two further observations on the Canadian hoser figure seem pertinent at this point. The first is that

there have been no equivalent attempts within popular culture to construct a distinctively or even partially Canadian female persona with anything resembling the scale of invention and continuity manifest in this masculine figure. If the cultural predicament of the stereotypical English Canadian takes the form of low ambition and ridiculously simple pleasures, this is seen to be best epitomised by youthful masculine figures and the performers who have excelled at playing them. The second thing to be said about this strand in Canadian popular culture is that it weaves itself in and out of a relationship to music which is fixated on its most masculinist versions. The musical references in this corpus remain those of 1970s hard rock and metal, and, much of the time, the Canadian versions thereof, both noble and ridiculous. The degraded musical tastes of failed fictional men have nourished a national imaginary much more successfully than the extraordinary musical achievements of successful women.

## Conclusion

Cumulative compendia of album sales in the United States covering periods from 1991 (when SoundScan measurements began) to each year from 2000 to 2014 confirm the extraordinary success of Dion, Morissette, and Twain beyond the 1990s. For each of the 15 years during this period, the same albums (all of them from the 1990s) occupied the three top positions and moved around between these: Metallica's *Metallica*, Shania Twain's *Come On Over*, and Alanis Morissette's *Jagged Little Pill*. Between 2000 and 2011, Celine Dion's *Falling Into You* figured in the top ten of the same list. In a separate listing, of the best-selling albums for the decade 1991–1999, Morissette's *Jagged Little Pill* sat at no. 1, Twain's *Come On Over* at no. 2, and Dion's *Falling Into You* at no. 5. Setting aside the *Bodyguard* soundtrack, these were the only albums by female performers on the list; they were certainly the only records by Canadians ('List of best-selling albums in the United States of the Nielsen SoundScan era').

The success of Celine Dion, Alanis Morissette, and Shania Twain was sufficiently multi-faceted, international, and enduring that it has not crystallised within any punctual, commemorated moment. It has not produced a single milestone, like the week of November 7, 2015 when, for the first time ever, Canadian artists occupied the top four positions on *Billboard* magazine's Hot 100. In this case, all four of the performers represented were male: The Weeknd, Drake, Justin Bieber, and Shawn Mendes. While Dion, Morissette, and Twain had all come from geographically minor sites of Canadian culture, three of these men had begun their careers in Toronto, Canada's media capital and largest city (and the fourth, Justin Bieber, was from nearby London, Ontario.) Drake had been an adolescent television star in the programme *Degrassi: The Next Generation*; Bieber and Mendes had attained internet celebrity by their mid-teens. The ascension of Abel Makkonen Tesfaye (The Weeknd) more closely resembled the conventional emergence from

a local scene, with the 2011 release to the internet of three critically acclaimed mixtapes, but that rise, too, was marked by the posting of videos to Youtube. If The Weeknd arrived with greater musical credibility, Bieber and Drake had to struggle to shake off the image of their teen stardom, with significant success in both cases. Mendes has seemed more at home with his broad, middle-of-the-road appeal.

That these figures now stand as the international emblems of Canadian musical celebrity is welcome to the extent that they embody a broader diversity of origins and cultural influences than was represented by Dion, Morissette, and Twain. Their success is symptomatic, nevertheless, of the very low presence of Canadian female performers in today's popular music culture, at both the Canadian and international levels. A 2018 study from the University of Southern California showed that just 22.4% of artists on Billboard's Hot 100 chart, during the period 2012–2017, had been women, and that the roles of songwriter and producer were even more drastically skewed in favour of men (Smith et al. 2018). In 2018, only two Canadian female performers (Avril Lavigne and Alessia Cara) entered Billboard's Top 40, where they were lost amidst the multiple chart places occupied by the aforementioned men ('2018 Billboard Hot 100 Statistics'). As 2019 begins, musical celebrity in Canada, as in much of the world, is the property of men.

My treatment of the careers of Dion, Morissette, and Twain here has been wilfully reductive, regarding their celebrity as a substance which expands and contracts over time and across trajectories of geographical movement. As such, I have had little to say about the aesthetic dimensions of their music, or the affective relationships that music might elicit. To look at these figures as circulating tokens of national and gendered identity is to eschew the experiential thickness which is evoked in ethnographic work on fan cultures or multi-levelled accounts of musical community (to reference but two of the dominant tendencies in contemporary popular music studies).

Nevertheless, there is a usefulness, I would suggest, in looking at the transnational scattering of these tokens of identity, and at their take-up in different contexts in which popularity is measured and in which commentary, however fleeting, labours to provide rankings and understandings. In this transnational scattering, Hawkins' figure of the British dandy and that of the 'emotive' or 'moody' Canadian female superstar represent condensations of posited national particularisms which accompany performers as their celebrity travels in the world. These condensations assist in the process by which identities become intelligible, but they are also, in David Novak's terms, 'ephemeral by-product[s] of media circulation and its eclectic overproduction of images and signifiers' (Novak 2010, 40). The British dandy, of course, is a much more recognisable and resonant figure in the world than the Canadian practitioner of 'heavyweight MOR singing' (Taylor 1999), but such differences express longstanding inequities in the gendering of musical value and the assignment of status to national musical cultures.

**Note**

1 For one of the only academic accounts of the ‘hoser’ see Diduck (2006).

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