

Reviews



North of Empire: Essays on the Cultural Technologies of Space.
By Jody Berland. Durham (NC): Duke University Press. 2009. 386 pp.
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Jody Berland's *North of Empire* is an astute, compelling retrospective of half a career's thought on media spaces from a distinctly Canadian perspective. It is the best book in a generation to argue for the value of a Canadian approach to cultural studies, not just parochially but as a critical contribution to the contemporary study of culture anywhere. Given its substantive focus, it should be no surprise to learn that the Canadian Communication Association awarded *North of Empire* its 2009 Gertrude J. Robinson book prize (full disclosure: I served on the jury). Nonetheless, an anthology of previously published essays is not an obvious choice for a book award. Referring in her postscript to the heightened concern about protecting and nurturing Canadian culture amidst debates over free trade negotiations in the 1980s, Berland reminds us that "just because something is past does not mean it is not present" (p. 301). She could be explaining the continuing relevance, even spectral centrality, of her own concerns in this collection of essays. Although the chapters were originally published between 1988 and 2005, each is updated and thematically positioned out of chronological order to create a surprisingly cohesive monograph.

The argument throughout is that a Canadian standpoint contributes a uniquely important understanding of the cultural production of space with an emphasis on technology and communication. This claim is elevated beyond polemic or metaphor precisely because of the expanse of time and topic necessarily covered by an anthology of a single author. The only drawback of working in hindsight is a somewhat defensive undercurrent. Also, in the postscript, for example, Berland upends the meaning of "history of the present" by turning it into utopian projection rather than genealogy. Challenged to tell the history of cultural studies from 200 years in the future, she ventures nine hypothetical first sentences. It is striking that these implicitly address the present generation of scholars and students by justifying the concerns of Berland's past scholarship "in the twentieth century"; "before the internet"; when "people watched the same television shows"; when "race and gender interrupted ... Enlightenment's claims"; before scholars recognized "the contradictions of building a polity through the government of culture." Some things have passed, indeed, and yet *North of Empire* is a reminder that they remain present.

I do not mean to cast Berland's book as a lament for the national study of Canadian culture. It is neither nostalgic, nor merely a historical review of cultural studies in Canada. Its strength as a compilation is that its theoretical concerns and methodologies are utterly current, and all the more so for overtly tackling the now somehow

dusty question of the particularity of Canada. Continual revision of the evidence and literature refreshes even the oldest of the essays. In a superb example of articulation at work illuminating Berland's own thoughts, recognizably dated methods and concerns are juxtaposed with current approaches.

Berland's argument is both familiar and worth repeating: from Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan through to the present, a Canadian understanding of communication and culture contributes to Anglo-American scholarship by putting cultural technologies at the centre of the formation of "spaces of empire." Because Canada has been formed through media space as both the subject and object of empire, both colony and colonizer, Canadian scholarship offers cultural studies a prism to understand the governed work of culture through technology. Inscribed onto bodies and spaces, culture in Canada can be understood from the inside on both sides of power, joining "the idea of culture to political goals of nation-building and political sovereignty, and, within these constraints, to the idea of justice and equity in difference" (p. 9). Canadian discourse on space and communication continuously attends to the interconnectedness of ideas of place, ethics, history, and belonging in forming a critical shared identity among a people who lack a shared history.

In this argument, of course, Canada is always also not the United States, no matter how similar its culture might seem. Berland's first substantive chapter, "Writing on the Border," defines distinctions between Canada and the United States as a consequence of cultural communications. A point from Innis, revised by many to claim a quintessentially postmodern character, Berland revisits the logic here in terms of popular culture in the era of global free trade. "The border's location is the outcome of history and politics, as well as water routes, and its status and meaning continue to be marked by them" (p. 43). That the border is marked by culture is extended to the entire relation between the nations (or at least to Canada's relation to the United States, as the process remains largely invisible from the other side).

Next come two essays that theorize Canadian space and culture more abstractly, a "lit review," if you will, that firmly connects the traditions of Innis and McLuhan to Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey, and David Harvey, and sets a foundation for more grounded studies of specific cultural technologies that follow. Sound technologies and the electronic reproduction of music are Berland's long-standing field of study, and the oldest and youngest essays place that concern at the very centre of the book: "Locating Listening," an early, sweeping formulation of radio programming and broadcasting as tools of colonial and anti-colonial regimes and nation building; and "The Musicking Machine," a focused media history of the mechanical piano (rather than, say, the phonograph) as the predecessor of digital music players.

The concern with technologies of music and popular culture transitions into case studies about more overtly spatial technologies mediating the natural environment. A chapter on cold weather as a cultural construct seems essential to her justification of Canadian theory, leading smoothly into a chapter on satellite imaging and "the implosion of land, landscape, and LANDSAT." Beginning with ideas of space, the book culminates with a theoretical take on the discourse of "evolution" in technological culture. Here, the legacy of frontier expansion is extended through the politics of new media and the militarization of space. Again, if "America" continues to be constituted

by an optimistic view of technology as a solution to the difficulty of its frontier, then, from its place north of empire, Canadian cultural studies offers a counteraction by theorizing that very process.

Reading *North of Empire*, it struck me as ironic that although the study of culture in Canada is fully institutionalized (in disciplinary associations, journals, and doctoral programs), concern for a uniquely Canadian cultural studies has largely been left behind. Not that Canadian content is marginalized, but the explicit conceptual problem of Canada has been left to the spaces between the lines of contemporary case studies, histories, and theory, all done in a global professional context. Perhaps, in moving away from the margins of the academy, cultural studies in Canada has lost touch with the national question. *North of Empire* stands as a corrective.

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