

## Second City or Second Country? The Question of Canadian Identity in SCTV's Transcultural Text

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**Take off, eh?** When *SCTV* began broadcasting its programming day on September 21, 1976, Canadian viewers were introduced to a new brand of television satire that would develop and grow with the show for its eight-year run. Between 1976 and 1984, *SCTV* moved from a local Canadian television station, to North American syndication, to American network television and, finally, to pay-TV. The show was composed of a series of sketches woven together with recurring characters and behind-the-scenes narratives about the machinations of a fictional television network called *SCTV*.

Though *SCTV* satirized and parodied American popular culture, two of the show's most successful characters were Bob and Doug McKenzie (Rick Moranis and Dave Thomas), simple-minded Canadian brothers whose primary interests in life included beer, back bacon, and finding "topics" for their two-minute show, "Great White North." The McKenzie Brothers were a huge sensation in Canada.<sup>1</sup>

Most tellingly, in 1981, an Ottawa fan nominated Moranis and Thomas for the Order of Canada for their contribution to "our cultural sense of identity."<sup>2</sup> In 1982, Thomas and Moranis produced the comedy album *Great White North*, which sold 350,000 records in Canada and made the Billboard top ten in the U.S.<sup>3</sup> The pair even wrote, directed, and starred in a 1983 film featuring the two characters, *Strange Brew*. Though it received mixed reviews, *Strange Brew* has since become a cult classic in North America and the brothers are still intimately connected with Canadian identity.<sup>4</sup>

In "How to Get a Mouse in Your Beer Bottle" (1982), Rick Salutin argued that the tradition of Canadian entertainers who imitate "a certain typical Canadian style" for laughs was nothing new, but that Thomas and Moranis did not fall into the same tradition of "Canadian self-putdown."<sup>5</sup> Salutin saw the pair differently. There was a degree of pride in what they did and they appealed to an audience who may have seen themselves in Bob and Doug or simply enjoyed emulating them.<sup>6</sup> Although Salutin celebrates the McKenzie Brothers for their Canadian everyman quality, at the heart of these two characters is a more rebellious streak. The story behind the popular duo is that Bob and Doug were conceived as a response to Canadian content demands made during *SCTV's* run on CBC and in U.S. syndication.<sup>7</sup> The CBC had fewer commercial breaks than American television, so *SCTV's* writers were asked to fill two extra minutes in Canada. Because of Canadian broadcast regulations, the CBC asked that *SCTV* fill this time with content that was distinctly Canadian. In an interview for the *Chicago Tribune*, Rick Moranis describes their reaction, "We thought this was ridiculous. Granted we grew up dominated by American culture and we love satirizing it, but we do the show in Canada, we write it here, we're Canadians—how can they ask us to be more Canadian?"<sup>8</sup> In an article for *Newsweek*, Dave Thomas explains that their intention in creating Bob and Doug was to make "a satiric statement on what happens when you try to make entertainment a nationalistic issue."<sup>9</sup> Often masked by the McKenzie Brothers' wider popularity, is the fact that their very inception came from the desire to ridicule Canadian content regulations. What was meant to be a sarcastic snipe at the CBC became a North American phenomenon.

In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1990), Stuart Hall describes two notions of cultural identity: one is founded on the similarities of a shared past<sup>10</sup> and the other is constituted by difference and made up of "ruptures and discontinuities."<sup>11</sup> Hall's description points to the way in which cultural identity is continually being negotiated. It is "a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation."<sup>12</sup> This fluid notion of identity is key to understanding *SCTV's* representation of Canada in a transcultural context.

As signifiers of Canadian identity, Bob and Doug McKenzie play on these notions of similarities and difference. The characters draw attention to and complicate the production and representation of national identity. In a Canadian context, Bob and Doug are a satirical portrayal of the essentialization that comes with a national identity imposed from above. The ensuing celebration of this comic representation of identity in extra-textual discourse also created a feeling of

national identity and unity founded not on intervention by the state, but, as Margaret Atwood puts it, by using humour “as a weapon.”<sup>13</sup> In this way, national identity is at once critiqued and reified through an assertion of difference. Bob and Doug are a representation of a folksy identity associated with local Canadian communities, which questions the validity of the top-down imposition of a national identity by Canada’s federal government.

Likewise, *SCTV* negotiates the similarities and differences, which constitute notions of Canadian identity. As an independently produced show, *SCTV* worked with, but not within, the government-regulated world of Canadian broadcasting. Through its ongoing satire and parody of American television, *SCTV* played with the sense of difference that Canadians often use to identify themselves in relation to the U.S. In the same way that Ted Madger reflected that he felt more Canadian watching “violent American television” than when watching Anne of Green Gables,<sup>14</sup> *SCTV* fortified a sense of identity through a critical distance from American culture.

The production of Canadian identity through difference is altered somewhat with *SCTV*’s success on American television. *SCTV* represented another kind of comedic identity, one that set it apart from *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*, 1975-present), which was seen as losing its satiric edge.<sup>15</sup> Through its distanced critique of American television, *SCTV* became a point of comparison to *SNL*. In this way, critics who shared a love of Canada’s *SCTV* differentiated it from the decreasing quality of American late-night comedy.

Taken as discrete contexts of reception, *SCTV*’s ‘Canadianness’ carries different significance for Canadians and Americans. The rise of cable and satellite technologies in the 1970s led to an even greater sharing of culture between Canada and the U.S. This sharing of culture meant that Americans and Canadians had and have a set of common cultural references from which to draw. *SCTV*, then, can be read as a transcultural text that provides a space for the development and overlap of Canadian, American and North American identities. What remains consistent in every context are the representations of a Canadian cultural and national identity.<sup>16</sup> The way this identity plays out on *SCTV* and in Canadian and American media discourse reflects Hall’s assertion that identity is “a production” that is “always in progress.”<sup>17</sup>

**“*SCTV* is on the air!”** Although *SCTV* is a Canadian show, its roots in the Second City in Chicago point to a more hybridized identity. In 1973, Second City founder, Bernie Sahlins, held auditions for a Toronto offshoot of his successful American comedy troupe and the franchise rights were sold to Toronto entrepreneur Andrew Alexander a year later. A number of Canadian Second City performers—John Candy, Eugene Levy, Dave Thomas, Catherine O’Hara and Martin Short—later became *SCTV* cast members. Only two performers—Andrea Martin and Joe Flaherty—were American. Other core cast members of Second City included Gilda Radner and Dan Ackroyd, who both went on to star in *Saturday Night Live* when it premiered in 1975.

*SCTV*’s later rivalry with *SNL* was due, in part, to their shared Second City

heritage. After the departure of Ackroyd and Radner, Alexander feared that the U.S. networks would begin to poach the rest of his cast. The impetus for creating *SCTV* was to keep his Toronto troupe together. The first 52 episodes ran on Global Television between 1976 and 1979 and in 1977, the show made its way to the U.S. in syndication.<sup>18</sup> Whenever possible, *SCTV* was aired before or after *Saturday Night Live* in order to capitalize on the American show's popularity. By 1979, Global announced that they could no longer afford to produce *SCTV*. The final episode aired on Global on March 3, 1979, but *SCTV* continued in syndication for the next year and a half, airing on the CBC in Canada.

When Alexander was shopping *SCTV* in the U.S. in 1977, he approached Frank Silverman, then president of ABC. Silverman rejected the show, arguing that, "the troupe was 'far too intelligent' for network distribution."<sup>19</sup> Silverman's comment illustrates that from its earliest days, *SCTV* produced a feeling of difference, even sophistication, in its comedy, which reinforced a sense of Canadian cultural identity as distinct from America. By 1981, Fred Silverman was working at NBC and ready to reconsider. With producer Lorne Michaels leaving *Saturday Night Live*, the show's future was uncertain and, as Robbins points out in his program guide to *SCTV*, "NBC needed quality programming—the night of *SCTV*'s premiere, NBC's primetime lineup included the movie *The Harlem Globetrotters on Gilligan's Island*."<sup>20</sup> *SCTV*'s success in syndication was enough to prompt Silverman to take a chance on the show. New episodes were produced for NBC and began airing as *SCTV Network 90*, in May of 1981. The show ran for three seasons on NBC, airing on Fridays after *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson* (1962-1992), from 12:30 to 2:00 a.m. This late timeslot became part of the discourse around *SCTV*'s sophistication and difference. As Howard Rosenberg lamented, it was "almost as if the network had decided terrific satire only works when the audience is asleep."<sup>21</sup>

One of the biggest changes that accompanied this move to the American network was the shift from a thirty-minute to a ninety-minute show. While *SCTV* was produced for NBC, the show continued on the CBC in Canada with the ninety-minute episodes trimmed to an hour-long format. In an attempt to make the show more like the New York-produced *Saturday Night Live*, NBC's suggested incorporating musical guests, and *SCTV* often did so quite successfully. The network's requests that they begin to write sketches to include "more youth-oriented drug humor," were rejected.<sup>22</sup> Although *SNL* increasingly turned to drug humor in order to attract a younger audience, *SCTV* distinguished itself by avoiding this sensibility, thus embracing a more straight-laced humor and refusing to "play down to the audience."<sup>23</sup> In the second and third seasons, the show's sophistication was rewarded with thirteen Emmy nominated episodes, and two Emmys for best writing.<sup>24</sup>

In May of 1983, NBC announced its plans to cancel *SCTV* due to high production costs and low ratings. Andrew Alexander was unwilling to take NBC's offer of a special pilot that would test the waters in prime time, as he was worried about compromising the show's future syndication value.<sup>25</sup> Instead, Alexander announced that in the summer of 1983, *SCTV* would move to Cinemax in the

U.S. and Canada's newly launched Superchannel. Given *SCTV's* niche appeal in the U.S. and the increasing fragmentation of North American television audiences, it seems only logical that the show would eventually end up on pay-TV. For Cinemax and Superchannel, the assumption was that by incorporating original programming like *SCTV* into their schedule of repurposed Hollywood films, they would be able to "target a younger, more upscale audience."<sup>26</sup> *SCTV's* identity, having been established in syndication and on network television, ultimately became a branding strategy at a time when pay-TV was becoming an increasingly important player in the television industry. The show began airing on November 22, 1983, with two forty-five minute episodes each month. After a year on pay-TV, *SCTV* ended its run in 1984.

**Humouring Canadians** In her article "Canadian Humour in the Media, Exporting John Candy and Importing Homer Simpson" (1996), Beverly Rasporich cites Henri Bergson's famous essay, *Laughter* (1956). "Our laughter," he argues, "is always the laughter of a group."<sup>27</sup> Bergson goes on to describe a "kind of complicity" that occurs between "laughers, real or imaginary."<sup>28</sup> Using Bergson's metaphor of the parish, Rasporich identifies the ways that humour works to strengthen and shape Canadian national identity, forming a kind of "community glue" that "brings the country together in the country's interest."<sup>29</sup> At the national level, Canada's "parish of humour" is most closely associated with "a rich tradition of political caricature, comedy and satire" less prevalent in American comedy.<sup>30</sup>

In the case of *SCTV*, the satire is rarely overtly political. For example, it is not necessary to know about the context of Canadian content regulation to laugh at the McKenzie brothers. But understanding this context adds to the comedy a distinctly satirical edge. In this way, the interpretation of *SCTV's* Canadian satire hinges on a culturally specific kind of knowledge and experience. However, when drawing on and satirizing American influences, the show also accesses a shared North American culture. This begs the question: how can a text that draws so heavily on American culture be read in the context of Canadian identity?

The answer may lie in the way that humour shapes Canadian identity by providing a means to resist outside cultural forces. Canada's proximity to the United States, both geographically and culturally, has been a concern when it comes to Canadian identity. The fact that Americans have often been identified as a "potential threat to Canadian national sovereignty," has made America and Americans the frequent "butt in the humour of the [Canadian] nation."<sup>31</sup> By acknowledging the threat through humour, this anxiety is transformed into cathartic release. The comedy, however, belies what Rasporich calls an "undeniable attraction"<sup>32</sup> to American culture.

In *On Location* (2005), Tinic builds on Rasporich's argument. She cites satire and parody as ways "that Canadians have negotiated a negative sense of identity, defining themselves through who they are not."<sup>33</sup> The interplay between the resistance and attraction to American culture is part of Canada's complicated relationship with the U.S. For Canadians, humour has frequently provided the most successful critiques of American culture.<sup>34</sup> Conversely,

comedy has also provided many Canadian performers with crossover success in the U.S.<sup>35</sup> This is certainly true in the case of *SCTV*. While the show operated out of Canada, many of the performers were traveling back and forth to the U.S., trying to build careers in the American film industry.<sup>36</sup> This connection between Canadian comedy and American culture represents a negotiation of a simultaneous desire for difference and similarity. By taking America as a comedic topic, Canadians can distance themselves from the culture, while still subscribing to the ideology that Hollywood is central to constructing a successful career. Canadian audiences and performers, then, are faced with a degree of ambivalence. This ambivalence, as we will see, plays out in the reception of *SCTV* and in the show's representation of Canadian and American culture.

In the case of *SCTV*'s satire of American media, the humour functions in multiple ways. At a time when cable and satellite television was opening up an increasing number of literal and metaphorical channels for the import of American culture into Canada, *SCTV* provided an antidote to anxiety about this invasion of Canadian airwaves. As the first Canadian show to be produced for U.S. network television, *SCTV* had the benefit of being a show primarily about television. In this way, *SCTV* "appeal[ed] to a larger audience: everyone is aware of the context of television, and everyone gets the jokes."<sup>37</sup> In Canada, however, the "jokes" were being made at the expense of American culture. Although *SCTV*'s approach was to take the guise of an American television station, the distance and satire that characterized the humour had strong ties to Canada's comedic identity. Yet the show also satirized Canadian media in sketches and incorporated a host of references to Canadian locations, celebrities and characters, illustrating what Rasporich calls Canadians' "ongoing need to see themselves specifically reflected back, as Canadians, in humour."<sup>38</sup> By lampooning encroaching American media while referencing and satirizing Canadian culture, *SCTV* formed the kind of "community glue"<sup>39</sup> Rasporich describes.

**"Who cares where it pays taxes?": Framing Canadian identity in a cross-border context** I *SCTV*'s critical success in Canada and the U.S. led to a wide range of responses. In Canada, *SCTV* was frequently celebrated for being a Canadian production. However, as a privately funded show with ties to America,<sup>40</sup> the degree to which *SCTV* could be considered Canadian was sometimes a contentious issue. Was the comedy produced in the show Canadian enough? Did the tone of the humor reflect a distinctly Canadian sensibility? Did the fact that the show drew on American media matter as long as the show was funny?

In a 1978 column for *The Toronto Star*, Dennis Braithwaite laments English-speaking Canada's lacklustre cultural identity, which he says is comprised of "left-overs from American culture."<sup>41</sup> According to Braithwaite, *SCTV* is un-Canadian. "The skits," he says, "are all on American subjects, or simply neutral shafts at the human condition."<sup>42</sup> He argues that because *SCTV* is in syndication in the U.S., the show's producers try to avoid alienating American viewers with content that might identify the show as Canadian. Braithwaite even goes as far as to suggest that many Canadian viewers "are unaware that it's a Canadian

show," which, he says, "would account for its good ratings and beaucoup sponsors."<sup>43</sup> This comment speaks to a key anxiety provoked by the influx of American popular culture to Canada: that enjoying American popular culture would preclude the enjoyment of Canadian culture or even transform Canadian culture, so that it was no longer recognizable as Canadian.

However, Braithwaite ignores the degree to which Canadians concern themselves with American culture. *SCTV* was not simply a show on "American subjects."<sup>44</sup> By approaching American culture through a comedic lens, *SCTV* produced a reflection that did not match the original. Laughing at this distorted reflection of American media, Canadians could use these "left-overs from American culture"<sup>45</sup> to strengthen their own cultural identity. "When Americans watch TV," *SCTV*'s Martin Short explained in 1993, "they're watching TV, but when Canadians watch TV, they're watching American TV."<sup>46</sup> Short's observation speaks to the importance of humour in the discussion of *SCTV*'s identity as a Canadian text. Although its target is often American culture, *SCTV*'s satirical take comes from a space of distance. The comedy is very much about the experience of being Canadian and being both a part of and apart from American culture.

Braithwaite was not the only Canadian critic to engage with the question of *SCTV*'s identity as a Canadian text. In two Toronto Star articles published in November 1981, after the show was picked up by NBC, the authors debate the merits of *SCTV* as a Canadian show. In the first, "That Second City gang on *SCTV* is okay, eh?," Martin O'Malley celebrates *SCTV*'s Canadian identity. "I feel like a winner," O'Malley writes, "For once, finally, as a Canadian, I feel I could hop a plane to New York and be welcome at any of the great bashes or elegant dinner parties just for wearing a toque and saying 'Okay, eh?'"<sup>47</sup> While many have described *SCTV* as a blend of U.S. and Canadian humor, O'Malley says, "there's something solidly Canadian about it, something zany and self-deprecating," which he attributes, tongue in cheek, to "the heritage of always trying so hard and always coming second."<sup>48</sup> This notion of coming second was not foreign to the cast of *SCTV*.

In an earlier 1981 Toronto Star article, John Candy spoke to an American reporter about his impressions of the Canadian reception of *SCTV*. "We have to keep explaining to Canadians why we haven't left for Hollywood, because that's the hallmark of success... We really made it [in Canada] when NBC picked us up here."<sup>49</sup> "*SCTV*," he says, "should stand for Second Country."<sup>50</sup> Expressing the feeling that Canadians are "used to being considered second rate,"<sup>51</sup> Candy voices his frustration with Canada's "undeniable attraction"<sup>52</sup> to the American entertainment industry.

This feeling of being second is not only a key aspect of Canadian identity, but also key to the transcultural history of *SCTV* and its formation around Second City. In the second Toronto Star article, "Stars and Stripes true *SCTV* colors" Slinger responded to O'Malley's celebration of *SCTV*'s Canadian identity, arguing that the show is as American as can be and citing the name "Second City" and its reference to Chicago.<sup>53</sup> The name "Second City" originated in a series of

articles by A.J. Liebling and published in *The New Yorker* during the early 50s. Liebling compared Chicago to other metropolises in the world, arguing that it lacked some of the culture of a city like New York.<sup>54</sup> The Chicago comedy troupe named their theatre "Second City" in response to the notion that Chicago was "a cultural vacuum."<sup>55</sup> This feeling of coming in second, then, is not particular to the Canadian identity. Rather, it is part of a larger dynamic that exists, in the case of Second City, between different localities in a nation and, in the case of *SCTV*, between nations in a more global context. This notion of being second is a facet of the Canadian identity that grows out of the dynamic of competition between Canada and the United States, just as Chicago became "second city" in relation to New York.

"*SCTV*," Slinger writes, "is a cunningly contrived package designed almost exclusively for consumption in the United States—it gives a little knowing wink to its Canadian connection; most of the actors worked at the Toronto branch of Second City—but it has been dressed in the Stars and Stripes because the big bucks are down there, south of the 49th parallel."<sup>56</sup> While Slinger does allow that the show contains Canadian references, he describes them as "Canadian residue" which consists of familiar locations or street names.<sup>57</sup> Despite his cynical take on *SCTV*'s Canadian heritage, he concludes that, "If something makes us laugh, who cares where it pays taxes?"<sup>58</sup> These articles are demonstrative of the conflicting notions about how the show can or should be read by Canadians. The show's comedy may be celebrated, but, ultimately, discussions of the way this comedy operates are used to argue for reasons why the show can or cannot be considered Canadian. It is *SCTV*'s humour that functions to reassert Canadian identity, even as the show is surrounded by and draws upon numerous U.S. influences

**Comedy that "wears the maple leaf": Framing Canadian identity in a cross-border context II** In Canada, *SCTV*'s success was frequently framed by its warm reception south of the border. "Our American cousins," a Winnipeg Free Press article proclaimed, "know that these days, the best comedy is that which wears the maple leaf."<sup>59</sup> The news that *SCTV* would be broadcast on NBC seemed to reaffirm Canadian confidence in the show. Critic Jim Bawden described the struggles of Canadians who "have spent a lot of years and wasted effort trying to land a spot on American television" by disguising their Canadian origins.<sup>60</sup> *SCTV*, he said, is "the first all-Canadian effort to get its first U.S. network slot." Writing for *The Globe and Mail*, Rick Groen declared, "for the first time, a home grown product labeled *SCTV* crossed the border to thrash the Yanks on their own turf."<sup>61</sup> These reviews celebrate the show's American success while also maintaining the distinction between Canadian and American culture. This speaks to the frequently ambivalent attitude towards U.S. culture that Rasporich and Tinic identify in their discussion of Canadian comedy.

That *SCTV* was called a "success story for Canadian TV"<sup>62</sup> is also significant, as the show's earlier incarnation was cancelled on the Canadian network, Global Television. At the time of its cancellation, Global said they could no longer afford to produce the show. However, the network was also broadcasting an increasing number of U.S. shows and the focus on Canadian content was being shifted to



news programming.<sup>63</sup> This celebration of *SCTV* as a Canadian success story, despite Canadian television's inability to sustain the show, is indicative of a shift in Canadian cultural policy in the 1970s, from supporting the production of culture in Canada, to an emphasis on building culture industries that would sell Canadian culture in Canada and the rest of the world.<sup>64</sup> The result was that the content produced under this model was often made to resemble "foreign works" with the hopes of increasing the possibility of international distribution.<sup>65</sup> In light of this desire to create marketable cultural products, it is logical that Canadian culture industries would model some content on work produced in the United States, the most successful culture industry in the world. The importance of the *SCTV*'s American success, as expressed in the Canadian media signals that, for better or worse, Canadian cultural expression was shifting towards a model based on industrial and economic prosperity. "Successful" representations of Canada were those that gained recognition outside of the country.

In the year after Slinger's critique was published, *SCTV* aired an episode that placed a great deal of emphasis on the show's Canadian roots. "Sammy Maudlin 23rd Anniversary/CBC" (November 5, 1982), took its inspiration from the NFL strike that began in September 1982, when, in an attempt to fill the gaps left by missing games, NBC aired Canadian broadcasts from the CFL (Canadian Football League). In this episode, *SCTV*'s janitors declare a strike, shutting down the network. Desperate for a solution, Guy Caballero (Joe Flaherty) contacts station manager Edith Prickly (Andrea Martin), who is on vacation with Prime Minister Trudeau in New York. Upon hearing mention of Trudeau, Caballero has a moment of inspiration and decides to pick up a feed from the CBC. This, he believes, will save him from having to show reruns, a move sure to incite a backlash from viewers.<sup>66</sup> While the remainder of the episode satirizes CBC television and Canadian film, the larger, formal logic of the show mocked NBC's attempt to introduce Canadian football to an American audience. In this way, the episode deals with specifically Canadian content while also situating itself in a larger, North American context.

The CBC content begins with a series of short sketches. The first is an uncanny parody of "Hinterland Who's Who," a series of 60-second informational shorts produced by the Canadian Wildlife service.<sup>67</sup> Following "Hinterland" is a "Monday Night Curling" promo and "It's a Canadian fact," the latter of which recurs throughout the episode. The Canadian facts are explanations of cultural differences between the U.S. and Canada, skewed towards a Canadian bias. For example, one "Canadian fact" proclaims, "Canadians celebrate Thanksgiving at the beginning of October and yet Americans celebrate their Thanksgiving at the end of November. That means we must have invented it because we celebrate it first." Following the "Canadian fact" is an ad for "Moose beer," whose tagline is "the one beer you can't get in the States." While the first two sketches operate as very resonant parodies, the latter two are satirical comments on attempts to define Canadian identity in opposition to American culture. Within the context of these very specific parodies of Canadian television, *SCTV* also presents a meta-commentary about the ways Canadians struggle to identify themselves in relation to and against American culture.

The longest sketch in the Canadian segment of the show is based on the Canadian film *Goin' Down the Road* (Shebib, 1970). The film and the *SCTV* sketch tell the story of two men from Cape Breton who travel to Toronto in search of prosperity. Instead, they discover that Toronto does not offer the endless opportunities they had hoped to find. Shebib's *Goin' Down the Road* embodied what Chris Byford identifies as the frequently described "loser paradigm" in Canadian film.<sup>68</sup> As Byford notes, this interpretation of the East Coast characters as an embodiment of a marginalized Canadian loser is problematic in its negative representation of Maritime identities.<sup>69</sup> However, the relationship between the East Coast and Toronto in the film has also been said to represent "Canada's perpetual younger brother role to the United States."<sup>70</sup> Byford's discussion of the film even extends to the *SCTV* parody. He notes the way that Flaherty and Candy's portrayal of the characters who, in the *SCTV* version, leave their jobs in the Maritimes to find "docterin' and lawyerin'" jobs in Toronto, adds to the film's "already ridiculous" representation of Maritimers.<sup>71</sup>

*SCTV's* *Goin' Down the Road* parody ridicules the division between Toronto and the East Coast, while also drawing attention to broader Canadian stereotypes. In one scene, the performers purposely emphasize the Canadian accent through lines like, "There's a mouse in the house," and "what's life all about." Here, the relationship and cultural differences between Toronto and the East Coast are transposed onto a larger cultural difference between Canadian and American accents. In the context of Canadian reception, the significance of *SCTV's* *Goin' Down the Road* takes on a more localized meaning; in a North American context, the parody becomes about national differences. Significantly, the interplay between Canadian film and American media is emphasized at the end of the sketch. When the fictional credits role, viewers are reminded that it was "filmed entirely on location in Canada, by Canadians, for Canadians," while the following title card reveals that the film was "distributed by American International Films." The recognition of this tension between the desire to claim cultural content for Canada and the dream of successful reception in the U.S. not only resonates in the context of the Canadian film industry but is also key to *SCTV's* production in Canada and its successful deployment to the United States.

### **"Bye bye Big Apple, hello *SCTV*": Canadian Identity Crosses Over**

Another transcultural concern was *SCTV's* satirical take on American television during a time when *SNL*, once a forum for those "who felt disenfranchised and alienated by television," had "lost much of its satirical sharpness."<sup>72</sup> *SCTV's* satire appealed to critics who were increasingly underwhelmed by *SNL's* offerings. When *SCTV* aired on NBC in 1981, it joined *SNL* and ABC's *Fridays* in the "late night comedy wars." American critics celebrated *SCTV* as "sophisticated satire"<sup>73</sup> and "the smartest 90 minutes on any TV channel,"<sup>74</sup> and for every positive review of *SCTV* came an inevitable comparison to the decline of *SNL*. One critic called *Saturday Night Live* "an unqualified disaster,"<sup>75</sup> and several called for *SCTV* to replace *SNL* on Saturdays at 11:30.<sup>76</sup> When *SCTV* signed with NBC, *SNL* was already in decline.<sup>77</sup> The show, some said, had begun to pander to the network's desire to reach the lowest common denominator. They "started to become what they were supposed to be ridiculing."<sup>78</sup> Even the cast and writers on *SCTV* picked up on *SNL's* shortcomings. A 1980 episode featured

a sketch called "Thursday Night Live," which poked fun at SNL's obsession with drug humour.

The general consensus was that SNL tried too hard to be "Big City Hip,"<sup>79</sup> while *SCTV* had the advantage of being removed from the New York and Los Angeles comedy scenes. This distinction was even noted in the opening credits of *SCTV*'s first episodes for NBC. Giving viewers some semblance of a back-story, Dave Thomas, as the announcer, explained that the cast members of *SCTV* had been,

Summoned by a force that none of them were able to resist. They were sent to New York City, the entertainment capital of the world, and showered with adulation and attention. They were given the red carpet treatment and ushered into the highest executive offices. They were given contracts to put *SCTV* back in business. But, abruptly, they were told to get the hell out of New York. The Big Apple just doesn't cut to hicks. Here's your bus boys. Yes, it was bye bye Big Apple, hello *SCTV*.

This introduction distances *SCTV* from SNL, both geographically and ideologically. It clearly marks the *SCTV* cast as outsiders to the world of New York, Hollywood, and urban culture in general. This is a revealing strategy given that *SCTV*'s most successful syndication was in "sophisticated urban markets."<sup>80</sup> It may be that *SCTV*'s outsider status provided the kind of distance and critique that SNL had, at that time, failed to provide. In the context of *SCTV*'s presence on American television, the same kind of marginalized identity that distanced the Canadian show from American culture became a signifier of difference in the discourse about SNL's decline.

Ironically, the assertion of difference and distance from American culture that contributed to the formation of a Canadian identity also strengthened a sense of identity for US viewers watching *SCTV*. Whether directly associated with the show's 'Canadianness' or its general distance from urban, hipster culture, this outsider status gave *SCTV* a distinct appeal to young American viewers. At an *SCTV* tribute during the 1999 Aspen Comedy Festival, Tonight Show host Conan O'Brien told the story of how he discovered *SCTV* and described his incredulous response to *SCTV*'s Canadian origins, "at the time it was just, 'what are you talking about? They don't make things in Canada. We make things and send it to them.'" Despite his initial skepticism, the show "literally changed [his] life." Unlike the other shows "being rammed down your throat," *SCTV* was an exiting discovery for the young O'Brien, "This is something I know about, my parents don't know about. This is my show."<sup>81</sup> O'Brien's reflection is important to understanding how *SCTV* functions as a Canadian text in an American context. The aspects of the show's satire and comedy that identify it as Canadian, its distanced critique of American culture and its underdog status on American network television made the show appealing to a niche American audience. By watching this show, certain viewers were able to locate their tastes in opposition to television comedy like SNL that had become too mainstream. The distinction is, in many ways, a matter of the local within a larger, transcultural context. As Canadians struggled to define themselves as different from the U.S., fans of *SCTV* in Canada and America wished that U.S. television could be more like

SCTV.

**Still looking for "Topics": Conclusion** With ties to Canada and the United States, *SCTV*'s overlapping contexts of reception make it an interesting text to consider alongside issues of Canadian identity. During its production and broadcast on Canadian and American television, the show dealt with the specificities of Canadian culture and identity while locating Canada in a larger, transcultural context. By presenting images of Canadian and American culture in concert, *SCTV* painted a realistic picture of the way in which North America was moving towards increasingly common cultural points of reference. However, it is within these similarities and commonalities that differences also need to be emphasized. As a Canadian production engaging with American television, *SCTV* did not represent, as was often the fear, an evacuation of Canadian culture in favour of U.S. popular culture. Rather, the show mediated this culture within a discourse of satire and parody, emphasizing, for Canadians, the different experience of watching American television from a Canadian vantage point. *SCTV* was a reflection of U.S. culture, but one that provided frequent reminders of what it meant to be Canadian.

Concluding with Bob and Doug McKenzie, *SCTV*'s most popular and most explicitly Canadian characters, is particularly apt. In the *SCTV* episode "The Great White North Palace" (April 16, 1982), a behind the scenes narrative plays on the real-life success of the McKenzie brothers. Station owner Guy Caballero decides to capitalize on the success of Bob and Doug through merchandizing and a prime time special. Naturally, the brothers agree with Caballero's plan. The resulting special, "Great White North Palace," plays out with all the obligatory glitz and glamour. When Bob and Doug make their entrance in glittering tuxes and bouffant hairstyles, they make an effort to read the cue cards, but lapse into their usual unscripted banter until they are dragged off the stage and (the real) Tony Bennett performs in their place. After another botched sketch, Caballero pulls the plug.

Reflecting on their aborted special Doug says, "You know what? We got hosed. First we had this little show, which was beauty and we loved, eh? Then we had this big show. And now we got no show." The incongruity of seeing Bob and Doug McKenzie hosting a network special is hilarious, but Doug's reflection on their downfall is somewhat poignant. Having found the remnants of their old set, the brothers sit, drinking beer. When Tony Bennett appears, he tells them that he was disappointed by the special. He had hoped to appear on "Great White North" as a "topic." Bob and Doug decide to do an episode of their show with Bennett. Although they know there are no cameras filming, the brothers shrug it off: "Isn't that always the way, that the best things in life happen when you have no way of recording it?" Of course, this is a reflexive moment, as *SCTV* viewers have watched the mock show unfold. In tracing the rise and fall of the McKenzie brothers in this episode, *SCTV* produces a rather negative impression of the appropriation of Canadian culture for capitalist (read American) gain. Again, *SCTV* produces a satire that is resonant in Canadian and American culture. What is reassuring, however, is that Bob and Doug return from their whirlwind journey through American fame unchanged. Although *SCTV*'s parody

of American television represented an ongoing performance and negotiation of cultural difference, these two characters always offered an unrelenting stability in their representation of Canadian identity through both their personality and the recurring two-minute "Great White North" sketch. Representing not only Canada, but an underlying critique of the federal government's intervention in Canadian identity, Bob and Doug are a stable Canadian anchor in *SCTV's* sea of American culture. Those who worry that the influence of American media will rob Canada of any semblance of national identity should take comfort in the fact that Bob and Doug face the barrage of American media hype and return, thirsty for beer and new topics.

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**Notes** 1 In 1981, Canadians celebrated them with conventions, parades and even a Bob and Doug day at a Toronto high school: Leslie Scrivner, "Trend to toques, beer, back bacon is taking off, eh?," *The Toronto Star*, November 2, 1981, sec. A, A4. 2 "BRIEFLY Order of Canada for Bob and Doug?," *The Globe and Mail*, November 3, 1981, 17. 3 Dave Thomas, Robert David. Crane, and Susan. Carney, *SCTV : Behind the Scenes* (Toronto, Ont.: M&S, 1996), 121. 4 In 2007, the pair celebrated their "2-4" (24th) anniversary with a television special and DVD release and on April 19, 2009, Global Television premiered a new animated series based on the characters. 5 "How to Get a Mouse in Your Beer Bottle: And other topics about the Great White North," *Winnipeg Free Press*, March 6, 1982, 12-13. 6 *Ibid.*, 13. 7 This story is told in many articles about the McKenzie brothers' success. For examples, see: Christopher Connelly, Lawrence O'Toole, "A southern triumph for the Great White North," *Macleans*, August 31, 1981; "SCTV in orbit as takeoffs take off, eh," *The Globe and Mail*, October 24, 1981; Cutler Durkee, "With Beer, Back Bacon and Banter, 'SCTV's Bob and Doug Mine Comedy Gold in the 'Great White North'," *People Weekly*, February 1, 1982; "Two Nerds From Canada," February 4, 1982. 8 quoted in Lynn Van Martre, "G'day you hosers!," *Chicago Tribune*, January 17, 1982. 9 Harry F Waters and Neil Karlen, "TV's Frozen Wasteland," *Newsweek*, July 19, 1982, 65. 10 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: community, culture, difference*, ed. Johnathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 223. 11 *Ibid.*, 225. 12 *Ibid.*, 222; In *On Location* (2005), Serra Tinic uses Hall's notion of identity in "process" and "production" to describe "the Canadian identity crisis." Serra A Tinic, *On Location: Canada's Television Industry in a Global Market*, Cultural spaces (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 20. 13 Margaret Atwood, *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose, 1960-1982* (Toronto: Anansi, 2000), 183. 14 Ted Madger quoted in Tinic, *On Location*, 22. 15 Tony Schwartz, "Whatever Happend To TV's 'Saturday Night Live?'," *New York Times*, January 11, 1981, D1. 16 As Marc Raboy suggests, attempts to reconcile localized identities with a Canadian national identity have most often occurred in the interests of white, English-speaking Canada (8). It is necessary, then, to specify that the Canadian identity with which *SCTV* engages forms part of the dominant discourses of English-speaking Canada and to remember that identity and culture, whether in national or international contexts, is always complex and contested. *Missed Opportunities*

(Montreal: McGill & Queens UP, 1990) 17 Hall, "Cultural Identity," 222 18 Initially, Global only aired one episode a month, but eventually, the show became a weekly fixture. 19 Margaret Daly, "Second City's made it!," *The Toronto Star*, October 4, 1978, D1. 20 *Second City Television: A History and Episode Guide* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2008), 103. 21 Howard Rosenberg, "SCTV': Satire Blooms in TV desert," *Los Angeles Times*, July 13, 1981, G3. 22 Robbins, *Second City Television*, 103. 23 Susan Whitall, "SCTV Takes Off, eh? (Thank You Canada!)," *Creem*, March 1982, 27. 24 In 1982, SCTV was nominated for Outstanding Writing in a Variety or Music Program for "Great White North Palace" (April 16, 1982), "Christmas Show (Dec. 18, 1982), "You!" (Oct. 23, 1981), Outstanding Variety, Music or Comedy Program, Andrea Martin was nominated for Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Comedy or Variety or Music Series and the show won the Emmy for Writing for "Moral Majority Show" (July 10, 1981). In 1983 SCTV was nominated again for writing for "Jane Eyrehead" (Nov. 26, 1982), "Towering Inferno" (Dec 10, 1982), "Midnight Cowboy II" (Mar. 18, 1983), "Christmas" (Dec. 17, 1982), Outstanding Variety Music or Comedy Program. "Sweeps Week" (Feb 25, 1983), was nominated for Outstanding Special Visual Effects, Outstanding Directing in a Variety or Music Program and it won the award for writing. 25 Jim Bawden, "SCTV Network could have the last laugh on NBC yet," *The Toronto Star*, May 4, 1983, sec. B, B1. 26 "SCTV lives, on despite NBC cancellation," *Broadcasting*, May 23, 1983, 60. 27 Laughter, trans. Fred Rothwell and Brereton, *Cloudesley*, 1914, 6. 28 Ibid. 29 "Canadian Humour in the Media: Exporting John Candy and Importing Homer Simpson," in *Seeing ourselves : media power and policy in Canada*, ed. Helen Holmes and David Taras (Toronto; London: Harcourt Brace & Company, Canada, 1996), 85. 30 Ibid., 84; Rasporich argues that Canadians were more "comfortable... satirizing their heroes and heads of state" than Americans. In more recent years, television programming like *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* have embraced political satire and built their massive success upon "mocking and ridiculing" President George W. Bush. 31 Ibid., 85. 32 Ibid., 86. 33 *On Location*, 131. 34 Rasporich identifies the origins of this kind of humor in Thomas Haliburton's *The Clockmaker* (1835), featuring Sam Slick "the archetypal, enterprising, fast-talking American Yankee" "Canadian Humour in the Media," 85. For a more recent example, see Rick Mercer's *Talking to Americans* (2001). 35 Canadian sketch comics Wayne and Shuster appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show* (1948-1971) sixty seven times. SCTV and Second City performers such as Dan Ackroyd, John Candy, Catherine O'Hara, Martin Short and Rick Moranis went on to produce films in America. More recently, sketch troupe *The Kids in the Hall* (1988-1984) crossed over to American television and Jim Carrey and Mike Myers launched successful careers on television and then in film. 36 By 1981, when SCTV moved to NBC, John Candy had already laid the groundwork for his future stardom by appearing in supporting roles in *1941* (with SCTV's Joe Flaherty, 1979), *The Blues Brothers* (1980), and *Stripes* (1981). Dave Thomas and Rick Moranis left SCTV to produce *Strange Brew* in 1983 and other cast members including Martin Short, Eugene Levy, and Catherine O'Hara, went on to have relatively successful careers in Hollywood. 37 O'Toole, "A southern triumph for the Great White North," 60. 38 "Canadian Humour in the Media," 88-89. 39 Ibid., 85. 40 SCTV grew out of the Toronto franchise of Chicago's Second City and two cast members,

Joe Flaherty and Andrea Martin were American. 41 "Identity drive jams in neutral," *The Toronto Star*, March 3, 1978, sec. C, C3. 42 Ibid. 43 Ibid. 44 Ibid. 45 Ibid. 46 quoted in Rick Marin, "The Most Entertaining Americans? Canadians," *The New York Times*, June 27, 1993, sec. 2, 1. 47 "That Second City gang on SCTV is okay, eh?," *The Toronto Star*, November 22, 1981, sec. F, F5. 48 Ibid. 49 Candy quoted in Jim Bawden, "Dan would rather folks like him more," *The Toronto Star*, October 22, 1981, sec. F, F1. 50 Candy quoted in Ibid. 51 Candy quoted in Ibid. 52 Rasporich, "Canadian Humour in the Media," 86. 53 Slinger, "Stars and Stripes true SCTV colors," *The Toronto Star*, November 27, 1981, sec. A, A15. 54 A. J Liebling, *Chicago: The Second City* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1974); Jeffrey Sweet, "Star-Spawning Second City Marks 20th Anniversary," *Los Angeles Times*, December 7, 1979, sec. N, N5. 55 Sweet, "Star-Spawning Second City Marks 20th Anniversary," N5. 56 "Stars and Stripes true SCTV colors," A17. 57 Ibid. 58 Ibid. 59 Randal McIlroy, "Television," *Winnipeg Free Press*, March 31, 1979, 32. 60 "Second City comics first rate to NBC," *The Toronto Star*, April 22, 1981, sec. D, D1. 61 Rick Groen, "Desperately waiting at the crossroads," *The Globe and Mail*, January 2, 1982, sec. E, E1. 62 Jim Bawden, "SCTV comedy fans grow week to week," *The Toronto Star*, July 31, 1981, sec. D, D1. 63 Tony Atherton, "A day in the life of a young station," *Ottawa Citizen*, November 27, 2002. 64 Ryan Edwardson, *Canadian Content : Culture and the Quest for Nationhood* (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 242. 65 Ibid. 66 Because of the show's intense writing and shooting schedule, SCTV frequently beefed up their episodes with older sketches from their syndicated run. This may have been a nod to some of the complaints they received. 67 For examples of "Hinterland Who's Who," see <http://www.hww.ca/media.asp?mcid=1> "Hinterland Who's Who - Video and Sound Clips Library," <http://www.hww.ca/media.asp?mcid=1> 68 Byford, Chris, "Highway 61 revisited," *CineAction* 45 (Annual 1998): 10-17. 69 Ibid. 70 Christopher E. Gittings, *Canadian National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2002), 158. 71 Byford, Chris, "Highway 61 revisited." 72 Schwartz, "Whatever Happened To TV's 'Saturday Night Live?'," D1. 73 Harry F Waters, "Midnight Laughs in a New Key," *Newsweek*, March 30, 1981, 83. 74 Jay Cocks, "Messages from Melonville," *Time*, November 9, 1981, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,922677,00.html>. 75 David Bianculli, "Not-ready-for-prime-time comedy alive and funny," *Chicago Tribune*, October 16, 1981, G20. 76 See for example, Jim Bawden, "SCTV coming home to Toronto," *The Toronto Star*, November 30, 1981; Tom Shales, "NBC's Friday Madness," *The Washington Post*, July 31, 1981. 77 Jeffrey S. Miller, "What Closes on Saturday Night," in *NBC : America's network*, ed. Michele Hilmes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 204. 78 Whitall, "SCTV Takes Off, eh? (Thank You Canada!)," 27.