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The McGill University campus in Montreal.

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Interdisciplinary Cultural Research with the CISAN

Over the last 25 years, I have conducted much of my research and teaching in the interdisciplinary field known as Canadian studies. During this period, my greatest source of collaborative energy and productive exchange outside of Canada has been the Center for Research on North America (CISAN) at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. It is a distinct honor for me, then, to be part of this issue of *Voices of Mexico*, as we collectively celebrate the center's 30 years of high-quality research, publications, and international exchange. This honor is made all the more rewarding by the fact that my very first collaborator at the CISAN, Dr. Graciela Martínez-Zalce Sánchez, currently serves as the center's director.

My introduction to the CISAN, in 1994, might be called serendipitous. I was invited to the center by a former student who had taken a position working in the cultural section of the Canadian Embassy in Mexico City. She asked me to deliver a couple of talks at the CISAN on Canadian

culture and the cultural industries, as part of events commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of diplomatic relations between Canada and Mexico. This was the beginning of a legacy of collaboration and collegiality that has endured over a quarter of a century and been one of the great joys of my personal and academic life.

In this short essay, I will reflect on the ways in which culturally-oriented research focusing on North America has developed at the UNAM. This is only a partial account, of course, based on those events I was able to attend or those projects in which I was involved. Nevertheless, across the long series of conferences, workshops, publications, and exchanges I have participated in, I have watched the center exemplify the very best features of interdisciplinary research. This research has been free of the sorts of marginalization—of regions, objects, methods, and perspectives—that so often marks academic collaboration at the international level.

The CISAN's website reminds us that its origins date back to an academic program (later a research center) devoted to the United States. This program's subsequent transformation into the Center for Research on North

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America signaled an expansion of its focus to include Canada. Canadianists like myself are familiar with the usual process whereby U.S. American studies centers, particularly in European countries, have come with time to add a small Canadian section, often in the way one adds a small extension to an already finished house. This extension often accompanies the move to embrace a “North American” focus—one that often forgets to include Mexico; the inclusion of Canada sometimes seems like the belated correction of an innocent oversight. In another model, centers emerge (or enlarge their focus) to study the “Americas” as a whole, a move which, while laudable in so many ways, often results in a significant marginalization of Canada and the dilution of Mexico within a more-or-less undifferentiated “Latin America.”

One of the CISAN’s great strengths has been its avoidance of these pitfalls. Its original expansion of focus, to include Canada, was more than the addition of a small sub-field. There are no doubt many reasons for this, but I suspect that it is linked to the fact that the CISAN, in Mexico, already occupies the North American space that is its terrain of investigation. While other centers of U.S. American or North American studies often operate at a distance, drawing their zones of interest on a distant map, the CISAN functions in a context in which the dynamics of continental identity are part of its surrounding atmosphere, perceptible in the center’s everyday functioning.

In the beginning, the most important of these continental dynamics, obviously, was the project of continental economic integration, mostly notably through the North American Free Trade Agreement coming into effect in 1994. If this event spurred the growth of economic and political research on Canada within Mexico (and vice-versa), it also stimulated a broader reflection on other aspects of the Mexican-Canadian relationship. These other aspects included the possibility of cultural exchanges between the two countries, not merely as a lightly imposed cultural “supplement” to economic and political relationships, but as a way of generating solidarities that might

slow the absorption of both Canada and Mexico into a cultural space dominated by the United States. From my perspective, as a scholar of media and culture, even as NAFTA fanned our anxieties over the possible loss of Canadian cultural sovereignty, it also invited us to pay new—or renewed—attention to Mexico as home to that other national culture that, like us, adjoined that of the United States.

What became clear, as Canadian and Mexican cultural researchers began collaborating, was that the familiar protocols of “comparative research” were of little value. In the decade that followed my introduction to the CISAN, a major focus of my research was the cultural industries, and the popular music industries in particular. As researchers at the center embarked on research in collaboration with Canadian institutions (like my own, McGill University), we realized quite quickly that comparison of these industries in the simplest sense was not particularly productive. The simple enumeration of differences between the cultural industries of Canada and Mexico would do little more than confirm the absolute distinctiveness of each national case.

The struggles of Canadian musicians to have their music played on the radio, for example, or available in recorded form, found few if any equivalences in a Mexican musical culture in which domestic musical styles and traditions were at the core of a national culture and scarcely absent from those media (like television and radio) that disseminated music. In the area of cinema, one could note the dominant place of U.S.-made films in present-day film exhibition in both countries. Over the century of cinema’s history, however, this dominance played itself out differently between Canada and Mexico. U.S. ownership or control of all levels of the film industry (in particular, production and distribution) has been a constant of Canadian cinematic culture from the early twentieth century. It is the main reason for the late, fragile, and partial development of a Canadian commercial cinema, which one can scarcely trace back further than the 1970s. The history of cinema in Mexico, in contrast, has more closely resembled that of Western European countries. Like Italy, France, Great Britain, and others, Mexico had, until the 1970s, a vibrant, popular cinema that drew sustenance from the genres and talent pools of a national culture. Between one country, then, whose national cinemas (both French and English-language) were always under

construction, and another, whose *epoca de oro* (or “Golden Age”) was behind it, the points of comparison were few. That both national cinemas now produced the occasional film consecrated in the world of international film festivals and art-cinema exhibition was not enough to obscure the very different histories that brought them to this point.

These vast differences, then, made the comparative analysis of the Canadian and Mexican cultural industries difficult to build. One could, as we sometimes did, focus comparison on Mexico and francophone Quebec, finding in the linguistic difference of both a detachment from Anglo-U.S. cultural hegemony that might nourish a more logical set of comparisons. Here too, though, differences in the position and history of these cultural spaces made comparisons of limited usefulness. The French language has served to protect much of Quebec culture (both popular and sanctified) from absolute U.S. domination, but it has not resolved the need for that culture to be subsidized and protected through elaborate forms of public support. Likewise, Mexican popular culture (its cinema, popular press, and music, in particular) has been hegemonic across the space of the Spanish-speaking Americas at different points in its history; French-language culture has played no such role within the global Francophone sphere. (The individual successes of Cirque du Soleil, Céline Dion, and Xavier Dolan are interesting, but limited exceptions to this.)

Generally, though, in the field of cultural research, it was easier for Canadian researchers to compare their cultural industries with those of Australia (another settler-colonial, predominantly Anglophone country) or the countries of Scandinavia (with their roughly similar policy frameworks for the support of national cultural production) than with those of Mexico. The fact that the popular, commercial cultures of both Canada and Mexico existed within the shadow of the United States was not sufficient to override very significant differences in the autonomy and historical rootedness of each.

The conventional protocols of national comparison, then, have remained a minor part of the collaborative work between Canadian cultural researchers and those working at the CISAN. Luckily, other, more fruitful and finely grained avenues of investigation presented themselves. In 1996, CISAN published the volume *¿Sentenciados al aburrimiento?: Tópicos de cultura canadiense* (Sentenced to Boredom? Issues in Canadian Culture). This book was edited by Gra-

ciela Martínez-Zalce and included contributions from myself and a number of Canadian scholars, some of whom the editor had met as a result of exchanges between McGill University and the CISAN, which took shape after 1994. The title of this book captured, ironically, the notorious reputation of English-Canadian culture (as perhaps uninteresting) even as the question mark cast doubt on that reputation. In fact, the phrase “Sentenced to Boredom” referred directly to a song by the English-Canadian poet-musician Leonard Cohen, a figure with a vast international following, including a significant fan base in Mexico. The various essays in this book dealt with the struggle to build a national theater culture in Canada, the relationship of Quebec cinema to Québécois identity, the weavings of language in Canadian literature, and a variety of other themes that represented the then-current stage of thinking on Canadian culture both popular and consecrated, “high” and “low.”

The importance of this book rested in part on the fact that it was the first full-length volume on Canadian culture to be published in Mexico. This was possible, not simply because its editor was a “Canadianist,” but because the CISAN itself was committed to the study of cultural issues alongside the questions of trade, immigration, and diplomacy one would expect in a center with close connections to public life and government. Re-reading this volume in 2020, however, one notices something else. Rather than culture being left to simmer on the margins of the CISAN’s activities, as a virtuous ornament disconnected from the larger issues of North American integration or political change, *¿Sentenciados al aburrimiento?: Tópicos de cultura canadiense* pursued the traditional humanist questions of cultural value and meaning against the backdrop of the policy frameworks, economic systems, and global positioning that have made Canadian cultural production distinctive.

In this respect, I would suggest, the book was faithful to what I have always considered one of the distinctive features of Canadian cultural analysis. While, in other

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national cultural contexts (most notably that of the United States), the study of cultural policy is a specialization, pursued by those with little interest in textual substance or cultural representation, for most Canadian scholars, it is difficult to abstract culture from the resources (both public and private) that sustain it and the policy structures that are one of its enabling conditions.

The model of collaboration exemplified in *¿Sentencias al aburrimiento?* was one I have happily followed in the quarter of a century since the book appeared. Rather than laboring to isolate the bases of a symmetrical comparison between Canada and Mexico (or among all the countries of North America), we have engaged in collective thinking about a wide range of objects, at multiple levels of specificity and from a variety of perspectives. In particular, I want to argue, the CISAN's legacy of collaboration in the field of cultural research has involved several strategies, explicit or implicit, that have transcended the enterprise of simple comparisons of one country to another.

One of these strategies has been to enlarge the variety of perspectives from which national cultural phenomena are viewed. Among the first CISAN events I participated in was a conference on "Canadian Identity through Its Cinema" (1994), which brought to bear, on Canadian cinema, the perspectives of Canadian, Mexican, and other scholars. Some of these were specialists in Canadian cinema; others were studying Canadian film, perhaps for the first time, in terms of other research interests (ranging from literature to migration.) Sixteen years later, a CISAN colloquium on "Crime, Society, & Media in North America" (2010) eschewed the conventional focus on comparing crime rates and policies across North America in favor of approaches that cast the themes of the event's title in new ways. Participants saw each nation's cultural treatment of crime as rooted in distinct articulations of textual form, political ideology, and media industry structures.

Like any good research center, the CISAN is home to expertise at very high levels on a wide variety of issues. It is distinctive, however, in the way it views the objects of research (such as crime or cinema) as open to multiple

expert perspectives, bringing these together in events and publications that produce fresh insights and overcome the inertia and incrustated ideas so typical of academic specialization. The rituals of academic exchange and collaboration between my Canadian colleagues and the CISAN team (the extended research visits, the mentoring of each other's students, the teaching as a visiting scholar) have served to distribute new kinds of knowledge and expertise throughout this scholarly community.

Other scholarly events hosted by the CISAN have followed slightly different strategies. I will comment briefly on three of these: a conference on "Globalization and its Manifestations in North America" (1999); another on "Road Movies in North America" (2011); and, more recently, an event devoted to "Cities and Their Nights: Montreal and Mexico City" (2014). Rather than remaining at the level of the nation-stage, and engaging in the sorts of comparison to which I referred earlier, these events all invited us to think about the two countries from novel vantage points. The first treated North America less as a collection of differences than as a space of circulation: one where cultural artefacts (music, literature, and cinema) traveled through different regimes of reception and valorization; in which readings and mis-readings made the continental dissemination of cultural expression a complex affair; and in which different market conditions or policy frameworks acted upon culture to accelerate or decelerate its ongoing movement.

This view of a circulatory space from above was distinct from the much more specialized focus of the 2011 colloquium on "Road Movies in North America." The road movie, of course, has flourished within both commercial, popular cinema and the "art" cinemas of numerous countries, even if it is seen quintessentially U.S. American in its preoccupation with movement and open spaces. To see the road movie as a North American phenomenon, however, was to encourage two fresh ways of looking at the genre. On the one hand, as the examples talked about in this colloquium showed, the road movie as an international form has been important to the cinemas of Canada and Mexico, and not simply to that of the United States. On the other hand, and of particular importance to the CISAN and its collaborators, the road movie, at different moments, has been a vehicle for conceiving new connections between Canada, the United States, and Mexico. What does it mean, researchers asked, if Canada—or

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Mexico—is a point of departure in a road movie that traverses the continent, rather than a destination? How have the two very different borders dividing the United States from its neighbors (Canada and Mexico) been represented in continental road movies, and what has each border come to symbolize?

A number of recent events at the CISAN have focused on the night-time of cities, beginning with the international colloquium ““Cities and Their Nights: Montreal and Mexico City” (2014) and extending to the recent workshop on the same theme in December 2019. This research interest responds, in part, to the explosion of international inquiry into the urban night and of a wide array of policy initiatives (like the introduction of “night mayors”) in cities around the world. In opening itself up to these developments, the CISAN continues its longstanding interest in urban questions, confirming once again that the scale of its focus is not simply that of the bordered nation-state.

From my perspective, these events on the night of cities, in which I am deeply involved, confirm the many strengths of the Center for Research on North America. The most important of these is one I have already mentioned: to look at the urban night is not simply to be interdisciplinary—that is, to bring together urban planners, economists, scholars of literature, and sociologists of nightlife—even though, in doing so, the CISAN is faithful to its long traditions of inclusivity and exchange. To welcome this work is also to ensure a space, within the

center, in which the humanities will not be isolated, set to the side as an aesthetic supplement to the more “real” issues of public policy or economic development. Posing questions of equal import about the regulation of public order and the aesthetics of city spaces, the urban night is, in many ways, the perfect interdisciplinary “object.” When these questions are applied to North American cities like Montreal, New York, and Mexico City, they invite that coming together of multiple knowledges for which the CISAN is so well suited. Finally, this focus, and the events just described, have emerged out of ongoing exchanges between the CISAN, my own department at McGill University and other networks in which we are implicated, together or separately. In this exchange, doctoral students, postdoctoral fellows, professors, and researchers at all levels, from Mexico, Canada, France, and Brazil, have found a space of collaboration and innovation.

The generous and welcoming atmosphere of the Center for Research on North America may be sensed in the commitment and enthusiasm of those who work there. I am referring here, not only to the center’s researchers, but to those involved in administrative coordination, publications, and the organization of events. All of these individuals carry out their work at the highest levels of professionalism, but all seem, at the same time, to partake of the lively and productive exchange that is the CISAN’s greatest strength. I congratulate them on the occasion of this historic anniversary. **MM**