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Sarah M. Corse

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# 1

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## Introduction: cultural fields and literary use

National literatures are an assumption of modern cultural landscapes. In countries around the world schoolchildren in state-mandated courses read the “Great Works” of their nation. Universities offer literature courses in a smorgasbord of national units: course catalogues list classes such as “Russian Masterpieces,” “The Brazilian Novel,” and “Major American Authors.” The style, themes, and narratives of each nation’s literary canon, the pantheon of most valorized and legitimated texts, are analyzed and debated both in the scholarly literature and in more general social commentaries. Educated people are simply assumed to be conversant with their national canons. In the United States “everyone” is familiar with – even if one hasn’t actually read – *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby Dick*. National literatures are the cornerstones of national cultures.

### National literature and national character

National literatures have traditionally been understood as reflections of the unique character and experiences of the nation. That is, it is felt that the unique experience of national life generates a national, collective consciousness, or in some formulations a “collective unconscious” marked by a distinctive set of values, tensions, myths, and psychological foci, that produces in turn a certain readily identifiable national character – the American cowboy or the French sophisticate, for example. This character, and the values, tensions, and myths from which it springs, is then discernible in indigenous cultural products. Thus the distinctiveness of a national literature is seen as the *natural embodiment* of the distinctive national character (e.g., Wolfenstein and Leites 1950; Goldmann 1964, 1970).

This reflection perspective is so deeply entrenched in our view of national literatures that it is rarely explicitly taught. Rather, as schoolchildren read

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2 Nationalism and literature

their national canon reflection is simply assumed as the appropriate way to understand how the literature they read is “American” or “Canadian” or otherwise nationally distinct. Thus, the American canon, as we learn in high school, is deeply rooted in and reflective of the hallmark of the American national character – individualism. The great American mythic figures are singular individuals; the core attribute of the national character is a self-reliant individualism. Discussions of historical American culture describe a tradition of “self-reliance as the cardinal virtue of individuals” in which even the family – the very center of affiliation, connection, and cooperation – is seen as nurturing a belief in the self-reliant individual (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton 1985: 62). This self-reliant individualism is reflected in a literature that critics and literary historians have described as characterized by men fleeing the social world of women and domesticity (often with a dark-skinned companion) to test their strength in the wilderness in a pure meritocracy (Marx 1964; Fiedler 1966; Griswold 1981; Baym 1985). What makes American literature American in this view is its emphasis on autonomous individuals defined *a priori* to society: the recurring story of a lone individual defining himself in the wilderness.

In Canada, on the other hand, the story of the national character and attendant national literature is very different. Instead of the optimistic self-reliance of the American character, Canadian schoolchildren learn that the Canadian character is enmeshed within its social and familial worlds, haunted by an isolating and malevolent Nature, and therefore cooperative with and defined by society. This social reliance and fear of the hostile wilderness are reflected in a literature that critics and literary historians have described as characterized by a struggle for survival within an entrapping family and an environment of violent and intractable wilderness (Frye 1971; Atwood 1972; McGregor 1985). What makes Canadian literature Canadian, then, is almost the opposite of American literature – a literary preoccupation with the embedding of individuals in relationships, the concomitant constraint this exercises on individuals, and, above all, the *social* identity of individuals.

The widespread assumptions of reflection theory encourage all readers of canonical novels, not just schoolchildren, to read these novels in particular ways – to read them through a nationalist lens. This nationalist lens in turn constructs a dominant interpretation of the novels. One of the most representative texts in American literature and therefore most valorized, according to the national character argument, is Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. American readers are positioned to read the text as a story of Huck’s flight from his inadequate and ultimately unimportant

family and the prissy repressiveness of Aunt Polly's world to light out for the frontier and the limitless opportunity of re-creating one's life – and to value the novel and its “American-ness” for that reason. One representative Canadian story, on the other hand, is Major John Richardson's *Wacousta*, the story of a beleaguered garrison, a mutually dependent and frightened social group isolated in a vast and uncaring wilderness brimming with menace. Canadian readers are positioned to see the “Canadian-ness” of *Wacousta* as its characterization of the isolating wilderness and of the possibilities for the people in the garrison – none of whom consider abandoning the group for the deadly forest and a chance at self-reliance.

While these renditions of what makes *Huck Finn* “American” and of what makes *Wacousta* “Canadian” give us a clear sense of the reflection perspective and make the connection between nation and literature seem obvious, there are actually a number of problems with this traditional argument. Most importantly, the connection between literature and the nation is far more complex than simple reflection and, far from being “natural” or obvious, the pairing of literature and the nation is in fact a social construction that performs powerful and important cultural work. I will return to a more detailed critique of the traditional reflection argument after presenting an alternative model for understanding national literatures and the cultural work that they perform.

### A sociological study of national literatures

Despite the prevalence and importance of national literatures, sociologists have largely ignored the development and importance of national literatures and the weakness of our theoretical explanations for them.<sup>1</sup> The study of national literatures has been left to non-sociologists whose traditional research approaches regard the meaning of cultural products as embedded within the product – and who understand the purpose of the research activity as being to uncover this existing and transcendent meaning. Meaning, in these formulations, exists apart from and independently of the conditions under which artistic production, consumption, and evaluation occur. In addition, such work generally ignores issues of representativeness and generalizability in favor of “close textual analysis” of one or several texts. Issues of sampling, if considered at all, are confined to authorial statements that the text or texts under consideration are particularly representative or of singular significance for one reason or another.

This study, however, is positioned within a more recent literature that

<sup>1</sup> For a notable exception see Griswold (1981, 1987b, 1992).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57912-4 - Nationalism and Literature: The Politics of Culture in Canada and the United States

Sarah M. Corse

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 4 Nationalism and literature

attempts to explicate the meaning of textual characteristics within an understanding of the social and economic arrangements surrounding the text, thus marrying a concern for the symbolic meaning of cultural works with an appreciation for the powerful effects of social contexts (cf. Wolff 1992).<sup>2</sup> By redressing the lack of sociological attention to national literatures through the application of recent theoretical and methodological advances in cultural sociology, I hope to develop a deeper understanding of the formation and significance of national literatures.

In the book I explore existing theoretical assumptions about the origin and function of national literatures and propose an alternative, more sociologically informed understanding of national literatures that incorporates arguments about variations in cultural use, the relationship between production context and cultural content, and the identity formation processes of the nation-state. While reflection theory implies that national literatures are grounded in individual-level psychological differences stemming from a dominant national character or a naturally occurring national culture or some form of “collective unconscious,” I demonstrate that these arguments are an insufficient explanation for cross-national literary distinctiveness. I focus instead on the social, cultural, and political process of literary *use* and national identity *construction*. I argue that both national literatures and nations themselves are socially constructed under identifiable political and historical circumstances – and that the two processes are deeply interwoven.

Historically, it was the “nationalism” of texts, in the sense of their affinity with the constructed national character, that became the premier criterion for their evaluation. Selection into the national canon, in other words, was predicated on the responsiveness of texts to the national character interpretive framework and their amenability to being read through the lens of national character. National canonical status is thus rooted in national exceptionalism. Literary explorations of the “unique” nation and its “exceptional” experience in turn help construct available images of the nation.

The heart of the book is an analysis of literary production, evaluation, and use in the bipartite fields of high culture and popular culture. That is, I understand how literature is used and what factors determine literary pro-

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Watt (1957); von Hallberg (1984); Radway (1984); Liebes and Katz (1990); Press (1991); Shively (1992); and Binder (1993). See also recent work in the sociology of literature (e.g., P. Clark 1982; Griswold 1986, 1992; Corse 1995), in the “new literary history” (e.g., Tompkins 1985), and in the “social history of art” and the “new art history” (e.g., Orton and Pollock 1980; T. Clark 1982; Parker and Pollock 1981; Wolff 1981; Baxandall 1985, 1988).

Cambridge University Press

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Sarah M. Corse

Excerpt

[More information](#)

duction and consumption by analyzing the broader conditions of its location in either the field of high culture or that of popular culture. The location of novels in the two fields is important because, as Bourdieu (1984, 1985, 1993) demonstrates, it is the relative positions of the persons and institutions which produce, consume, and evaluate cultural objects that determine their status – and therefore the very conditions of their production, evaluation, and consumption.<sup>3</sup>

High-culture literature is thus used differently and produced under different conditions than popular-culture literature because of its location in a field monopolized by elite agents, consumers, and institutions with a particular set of interests pertaining to their socio-structural positions. The essential opposition of the twin fields of high culture and popular culture and the organizing dynamics of each field structure the ways in which each type of literature is understood and used. Thus, for example, the symbolic role and power of high-culture literature is derived in large part from its juxtapositional, and hierarchical, status vis-à-vis popular literature.

Grounding this analysis of literary field and national literatures is my empirical comparison of forty-nine American and Canadian high-culture novels and over one hundred American and Canadian popular-culture novels. I chose Canada and the United States as the countries for my study because of the high degree of similarity between the two countries. Both are highly industrialized, North American nations with British colonial pasts. Both have largely English-speaking populations with similarly high degrees of literacy and higher education. Because of the degree of similarity between Canada and the United States, a comparison of their literatures provides a strong test for the existence of unique national literatures. In addition, one central difference between Canada and the United States makes these countries especially appropriate for this study. Despite their similarities, the process of nation-building in the two countries occurred at significantly different times, thus further providing a strong test of my argument.

<sup>3</sup> A competing line of sociological research argues that the high culture/popular culture split, despite its origination in and persistence since the seventeenth century (Bourdieu 1984: 2), is losing its theoretical power (Gans 1974; Blau, Blau, Quets, and Tada 1986; Blau 1988; Crane 1992). Research taking a “cultural convergence” perspective may argue either that the high/popular distinction is blurring (Levine 1988) or that cultural systems are simply becoming more highly differentiated (Gans 1985; DiMaggio 1987; see Shrum 1991 for a cogent review of these perspectives). Nonetheless, I find Bourdieu’s explication of the distinction between the fields of restricted and large-scale production fruitful as an *analytic* distinction. See also Anheier, Gerhards, and Romo for a blockmodel analysis of writers in Cologne, Germany which they interpret as showing that “the primary axis . . . does not differentiate between high and light culture, as one would expect from Bourdieu’s theory, but between core and periphery. Only the second, and less important, axis differentiates high from low culture” (1995: 891–2).

Cambridge University Press

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Sarah M. Corse

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 6 Nationalism and literature

The empirical comparison of the American and Canadian high- and popular-culture novels demonstrates the symbolic role played by high-culture national literatures and the attendant requirements of cross-national distinctiveness in contradistinction to the economic role of popular-culture literature and attendant requirements for cross-national similarity. In other words, high-culture literature is driven by forces for international differentiation because of its role as a constructor of the unique nation while popular-culture literature is driven by forces for international homogenization because of its role as an economic commodity.

### High-culture literature, restricted production, and the national project

The first part of the analysis focuses on high-culture literature, located in what Bourdieu (1985) refers to as the “field of restricted production.”<sup>4</sup> For my analysis, the two most important attributes of the field of restricted production are (1) the central role played by agents and institutions of consecration competing for cultural authority and (2) the central importance of the symbolic value of the cultural products within this field and the concomitant reduced importance of their economic value and thus their status as art-as-art.<sup>5</sup> High-culture literary texts are circulated and consumed within a nexus of institutions and agents invested both in (1) the production of cultural objects with certain attributes and consumers with the requisite skills for appropriating those objects, and (2) the establishment of their own claims to cultural authority vis-à-vis those cultural objects and their consumers. It is the second aspect, the use of high-culture texts as sym-

<sup>4</sup> In addition to the two points I emphasize, Bourdieu further defines restricted production by the importance of cultural capital accumulation for producers and consumers, by its highly educated audience, and through the relative autonomy of the field to set its own criteria of production and evaluation. Central to Bourdieu’s argument is the recognition of the *positional*, not inherent, nature of these attributes. Cultural objects derive their properties from the relative positions held by agents in the field and from the hierarchical juxtaposition and coexistence of the two fields of restricted and large-scale production, not from inherent attributes (1985: 17–22 especially; 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Although my analysis focuses on the symbolic value of high-culture texts as the central explanatory variable for them and on the economic value of popular-culture texts as their single most important aspect, I disagree with Bourdieu’s absolutism on this point (e.g., 1985). This may be partially a difference between American and French culture (Lamont 1992), but I find it excessive to say economic considerations have no relevance for high culture. Similarly, even the basest of popular culture may have an important symbolic value – witness the French dismay at the proliferation of McDonald’s or American television soaps. As I mentioned in footnote 3, other theorists have questioned the accuracy of such a sharp divide between high culture and popular culture (e.g., Crane 1992), but I believe the *analytic* distinction is justified given the difference in how high-culture and popular-culture genres are evaluated and used. I return to this point in chapter 7.

Cambridge University Press

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Sarah M. Corse

Excerpt

[More information](#)

bolic resources rather than economic commodities, that turns our attention toward the nation-building process.

Traditional theories imply that national literatures exist because nations are naturally different and this difference is naturally reflected in literature. I hope to show in the following chapters however that national literatures exist not because they arise “naturally,” but because they are an integral part of the process by which nation-states create themselves and distinguish themselves from other nations. Huxley, among others, remarked on this situation when he wrote: “nations are to a very large extent invented by their poets and novelists” (1959: 50).

This connection between nation and literature, however natural and inevitable it now seems, is nonetheless a relatively recent historical construction. The idea of national literatures originated with late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century theorists of nationalism, particularly the German Romantic nationalists who first promulgated the now accepted idea that literature is defined by its national affiliation and should embody the unique characteristics of a nation (MacLulich 1987). The underlying premise of the literary nationalists was that humanity is naturally divided into homogeneous, but distinctive groups marked by a unique set of values and concerns and by a distinctive “national character.”<sup>6</sup> This set of nationalist ideas created a vision both of the nation itself and of national literatures as naturally occurring, as arising without action on the part of specifiable individuals. Reflection theories subsume these assumptions, ignoring the fact that national literatures are created by conscious human action, as indeed are nations themselves. Recent theorists of the nation, on the other hand, have amply demonstrated the constructed nature of nations; they are “imagined communities” built as much in the minds of their citizens as in military or cartographic exercises (Anderson 1991; Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1992). National literatures, like nations, are created by the cultural work of specific people engaged in an identifiable set of activities.

Just as it is important to recognize that the connection between nations and literature is a relatively recent one, we need to recognize that prior to

<sup>6</sup> This also raises an obvious question about the disparity between the early ideology of nationalism and the current reality of many nation-states. While the rationale for national literatures as reflections of the national character is that the national experience is a homogeneous one and the people are “unified by a common language and culture” (MacLulich 1987: 26), nations such as the United States and especially Canada do not fall neatly into this category of “single language and single culture.” If the United States and Canada are both heterogeneous nation-states with large immigrant populations and a multiplicity of racial, regional, ethnic, and religious constituencies with salient subgroup identities, then how does a *unitary* national literature “naturally” arise and persist?

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57912-4 - Nationalism and Literature: The Politics of Culture in Canada and the United States

Sarah M. Corse

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 8 Nationalism and literature

the theoretical developments of the nationalists in the late eighteenth century, literature was not evaluated in national categories, but was valued in large part for its ability to transcend such categories – to speak across time and place. At least until the end of the eighteenth century, the basis for a European humanistic education was the “classics” (MacLulich 1987). These classics were seen as texts that transcended such parochial notions as nationality to speak to all people, or more accurately, all Western people. What made these texts superior was their very *failure* to act as embodiments of a distinct culture and people. They were instead the embodiment of the “best of human thought.” Indeed, this assumption that the best literature speaks to all people across all periods and embodies universal human truths continues to endure in tandem with more nationalist understandings of literature (e.g., Brooks 1975; Leavis 1948, 1969).

At the core of my argument then is a conception of national literatures as instrumental in the creation of nations with distinct identities. Far from being simple reflections of extant entities, nations themselves are both products of human invention and tools in support of further invention.<sup>7</sup> Despite Romantic nationalist imagery of the homogeneous culture which underlies the polity and unifies the population, most nation-states need be created from disparate groups, from populations with competing allegiances. The difficulties inherent in the forging of some approximation of the “natural” unit bound by “a common culture” and “distinctive traits” (the nationalist model) are attacked in part with a cultural artillery. High-culture literatures allow nations to posit “a transcendent realm of essential identity”; a vision of unity rooted in a common national identity, overarching all subsidiary differences (Lloyd 1987: x). High-culture literature is powerfully implicated in this process of “imagining” the nation (Anderson 1991).

In addition to helping produce a vision of the nation and an identity for internal consumption, national literatures also assist in the international arena. Since one of the “standard marks of nationhood” is “the possession of a national literature” (MacLulich 1987: 24), canonical national literatures also allow nation-states to compete for full status in the international community. In order to lay claim to full nationhood, nascent nation-states need not only military and political independence, but cultural independence as well (Schudson 1994). In the modern world, a unique national

<sup>7</sup> As McCrone (1992: 29) has argued about nationalism more generally, national literatures are “not the expression of objective differences, but the mobilisation of those [differences] which the actors believe to be salient.” McCrone is discussing Barth’s *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, specifically his contention that “cultural differences should be seen, not as primary and definitional characteristics, but as the outcome or implication of social struggles” (1992: 29–30).



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Sarah M. Corse

Excerpt

[More information](#)

culture is as much a part of full status as a nation-state as is the formalization of geographic boundaries and the establishment of independent political control (Dominguez 1992). Thus national literatures serve a dual audience in the cultural work they perform.

Because of these pressures for a distinct national literature, the primary selection criteria for national literatures becomes differentiation from other national literatures. In order to proclaim cultural independence, a nation-state must produce and identify a literature that differentiates it from other states, particularly the most relevant others – e.g., “Mother England” for the United States and both England and the United States for Canada. Thus any understanding of the source of distinct national literatures must acknowledge the overwhelming importance of the political need for national differentiation. National literatures are both the product *and* partial creator of the nation and our collective sense of national identity. National literatures are not passive reflections of naturally occurring phenomena, but integral components in the process of national development, consciously constructed pieces of the national culture, and creators of the world in which we live. The canon is chosen, not born.

### **Popular-culture literature, large-scale production, and economic hegemony**

In direct contrast to high-culture literature is the second part of the literary field, that of popular-culture literature. Bourdieu locates popular-culture literature in the field of “large-scale cultural production” which is defined in explicit and hierarchical contrast to the field of restricted production (1985). The important attributes of the field of large-scale cultural production for my analysis are (1) the dominance of economic considerations, i.e., “investment profitability,” over symbolic considerations and popular literature’s resultant status as a commodity, and (2) the orientation of the culture industries toward the universal or widest possible audience as a necessary condition of profitability.<sup>8</sup>

Popular-culture literature is used primarily as a market commodity purchased and consumed by individuals (Cawelti 1976). Popular-culture literature is often written under conditions of mass-production (e.g., Radway 1984: 19–45). Rather than serving a symbolic, constitutive role in nation-building, popular-culture literature tends to be used and understood by

<sup>8</sup> Bourdieu also focuses on the external source of production and evaluation criteria in the field of large-scale production (1985: 28–33 especially; 1993). See also footnote 3.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57912-4 - Nationalism and Literature: The Politics of Culture in Canada and the United States

Sarah M. Corse

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 10 Nationalism and literature

both its producers and its consumers as a readily accessible commodity driven by market forces.<sup>9</sup>

Because the organizing principle of the field of large-scale cultural production is investment profitability, it is necessary to obtain the largest, and therefore the *least* differentiated, market possible. Popular-culture literary production is driven by homogenizing forces that embrace universal themes and interests in the hope of attracting the largest possible number of consumers. Thus the central evaluative criteria for popular-culture literature becomes its popularity, which serves as a crude measure of profitability, hence the importance of “bestseller” lists. Relative sales figures are even presented to readers as a central evaluative criterion through the use of cover blurbs such as “Ten weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list.”

As its economic value predominates, the determining forces for popular-culture literature are market forces. In the United States and Canada this has meant the domination of the relatively weak Canadian publishing industry by much stronger American publishers. Factors such as Canada’s small population and concomitant small market, the historically distribution-oriented nature of Canadian publishing, the increasingly complex technology of publishing and hence ever greater economies of scale have all contributed to a situation in which American-authored and published popular-culture novels dominate the Canadian bestseller lists.<sup>10</sup> Despite government intervention in the form of protective legislation, subsidy, and tax incentive, Canadian publishers lag behind American publishers in control of their own national market.

### Differences in literary content

In addition to my central focus on the uses and production contexts of high- and popular-culture literature, I am also interested in the question of what the substantive differences in the content of national literatures mean. As I noted, reflection theory suggests that what national literatures reveal is the difference between the American and the Canadian national character. Although Americans and Canadians may well have some degree of measurable difference on personality scales, I argue that what cross-national literary differences actually show is the legitimated vision of “Canada” and of being “Canadian” and a similarly legitimated vision of

<sup>9</sup> Stephen King demonstrates the dominance of this understanding of popular literature in his 1987 horror novel *Misery*, in which the narrator mounts a strong defense of popular-culture literature and a concomitant attack on the pretensions of high-culture literature.

<sup>10</sup> British publishers and British-authored books also have a significant presence in Canada.